Root Beer Floats and Green Tea
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/32458288.

Rating:
Mature

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
Karate Kid (Movies)

Relationship:
Daniel LaRusso/Johnny Lawrence

Characters:
Daniel LaRusso, Johnny Lawrence, Laura Lawrence, Bobby Brown (Karate Kid), Ali Mills (Karate Kid), Dutch (Karate Kid), Jimmy (Karate Kid), Tommy (Karate Kid), Mr. Miyagi (Karate Kid), Sid Weinberg, Louie LaRusso Jr., Chozen Toguchi, Sato Toguchi, Yukie (Karate Kid), Kumiko (Karate Kid), Jessica Andrews, Terry Silver, Snake (Karate Kid), Mike Barnes (Karate Kid), Dennis (Karate Kid), John Kreese

Additional Tags:
Angst, Hurt/Comfort, mr. miyagi takes Johnny under his wing, Johnny adopts a bonsai, sid is awful, descriptions of past abuse and violence, some changes in movie timeline, Johnny apologizes, Slow Burn, post kk1 but after kk2's end of tournament scene and before 6 month jump of kk2, redemption tour starts now, Underage Drinking, daniel can't keep his hands to himself, it's mutual but they're idiots, ex-cobra's are wingmen, Angst with a Happy Ending, will continue through kk2 and kk3, boys go to Okinawa, Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees

Language:
English

Stats:
Published: 2021-07-09 Completed: 2022-08-30 Words: 783,314 Chapters: 127/127

Root Beer Floats and Green Tea

by desolateice

Summary

Johnny struggles with who he's become and realizes that it's not who he wanted to be. He decides to throw himself into apologizing and trying to make things better if anyone will let him.

Daniel struggles with the Johnny he thought he knew in his head and the actual Johnny he gets to know and how they don't line up anymore.

Notes

My understanding from the movies is that the tournament happens sometime around December or so, but I've moved it to after winter break and the beginning of the new semester. So we're starting somewhere in January immediately after the tournament is over and what happens at the beginning of KK2.

A thousand or so apologies

Laura Lawrence's manicured fingernails tapped on the marble counter while she watched the drive. She was waiting for Johnny to come home. She'd marked the tournament in her calendar but knew he didn't like his mother cheering him on in the crowd, plus she had to admit that she didn't like the panic and anxiety she felt when he stepped onto the mat and every hit hurt her more than it ever seemed to hurt him. So they'd come to an agreement, he'd tell her the play by play when he got home *after* all the blows were over. The last three years he'd come home late, out celebrating with his sensei and team, but he'd come home with a big grin on his face and a first-place trophy to show her. She'd make root beer floats and he'd tell her about the other people in the ring. He always spoke about how they telegraphed their movements and made it easy, but he'd also talk reverently about the effort they'd put in because he'd been competing against the same people for years now and he could see the improvement.

She chewed on her lip as she waited. This year though felt different. Johnny had pulled away more than he usually did. Ever since Ali had dumped him he'd seemed untethered. She'd pressed him to talk to her so that he could mourn the relationship and move on, and then he'd come home bloody and he didn't want to talk about it. This only seemed to continue to happen throughout the year, his knuckles were bloody and bruised and he seemed angry and frustrated. He wouldn't talk to her about it, just ducking his head murmuring he was fine and listening to his Walkman when he was home. Laura was pretty sure that Johnny never got closure or a chance to talk to Ali about what had happened and it ate away at him. It'd been a two-year relationship, his first serious one so Laura's heart went out to him.

The red Avanti pulled into the drive and she pulled out the root beer from the fridge, popping the caps and setting the ice cream on the counter to let it soften. She watched as Johnny walked towards the house, blonde head down and her heart sank. He must've lost. She left the root beers and hurried to the front door panic flooding her veins. He wasn't carrying his bag, he didn't have a trophy in his hands. Even when he had lost in the past, before his winning streak he'd still been so excited, so determined when he got home, just to talk about it, about the energy of the tournaments he'd fought in, of watching the winners fight, *it was electric* he'd said, eyes shining, but this... she hadn't seen this Johnny since before he'd started karate and got beaten

on the regular by kids older and bigger than him, the Johnny the first time Sid lashed out.

He looked up at her and her heart sank. He had dried blood on his face and his neck was an angry red.

"Hi Mom," he said and his voice was raspy, there were tears in his eyes.

"Oh Johnny," she said pulling him into a hug. She felt warmth on her shoulder, wetness. He was so much taller than her, stronger, bigger, but he was shaking. She quickly pulled him into the house and to the kitchen before the staff saw him.

"What can I get for you?" she asked softly, gently as he let her maneuver him to a stool at the island.

Johnny took a shaky breath and put his head in his hands. Laura looked at the ice cream and the root beer, the cups and the straws with a frown. They'd done this since he'd started karate, but this seemed rougher than any loss he'd ever had and that red around his neck had her concerned. She quickly made the floats deciding tradition should continue and set one down in front of Johnny and sat patiently across from him. She wouldn't force him to hurry, he was slow to open up, slower still about things that hurt him. But she wasn't going to let him leave her sight until he spilled everything. After a while, he let out a sigh and looked up.

"I quit," Johnny said. "Cobra Kai," he added after a moment.

"You have to start from the beginning," Laura said patiently.

Johnny pulled his float close to him and looked down at it with a frown, dipping his straw in and swirling the soda around the ice cream. "You know when I was supposed to talk to Ali?"

"Of course, you and your friends took your bikes to the beach," Laura said.

"I think it started there," Johnny said softly, his throat clearly hurt but he continued explaining the new kid who took everything the wrong way and played a knight in shining armor to Ali, the fight. Her mouth dipped into a frown, she'd heard the Cobra Kai creed multiple times and she'd understood the reasoning when Johnny had explained it. You make sure your opponent is down so they don't jump up and keep fighting you. It sounded like hazing, only hopped up on karate and

Johnny's frustrations over his broken heart. Apparently, the boy, a kid named Daniel LaRusso seemed to know exactly how to push the wrong buttons on Johnny and Johnny admitted to making sure Daniel didn't make it onto the soccer team, something he begrudgingly said Daniel was good at. He admitted to forcing the boy down a ravine and probably totaling his bike.

He wouldn't meet her eyes as he worked his way to Halloween. He got quiet. She remembered seeing him the next day bruised and battered. Johnny explained the fight, the way he went too far, the elderly man who stopped him when he couldn't stop himself. His voice had dropped so low, shame filling his voice. She pursed her lips, waiting for the rest. He explained the elderly man showing up at the dojo with Daniel to request they leave Daniel alone so he could study for the All-Valley. How Daniel used this truce to taunt Johnny, how Johnny kissed Ali in retaliation and made everything so much worse.

Johnny had thought less than a years worth of training couldn't defeat him, couldn't get Daniel into the semi-finals or even through the door to the tournament. But Daniel showed up with his sensei and with Ali and his mother at his side and then he fell into the tournament spiel like he always did. He talked about his fights, the fights he watched his friends in, and the fights he watched Daniel in, praising the other boy quietly. Daniel made it to the semi-finals and there Johnny paused for a while sipping at his drink then wincing at the bubbles. He told her how Kreese told Bobby to put Daniel out of commission in their fight.

While talking about the tournament he'd been looking at Laura, a bit of that spark was there, but now he couldn't meet her gaze again. She knew Kreese, the hold he had over the boys, how Johnny saw him as a father figure and felt her blood turn cold as she listened intently to Johnny tell her how Bobby had protested but ended up kicking Daniel in the knee and how the boy had crumpled in pain and how Bobby had thrown himself to the mat in immediate regret and apologies. The description of Kreese's face, how Bobby had quit Cobra Kai on the spot, and how Kreese had tried to win Johnny first place through trickery and additional damage. He spoke of his fear of Kreese at that moment, but how he still trusted him despite it. He hadn't wanted to win because his best friend had been forced to cheat and hurt Daniel. And he'd kept watching the locker rooms where Daniel had been taken hoping the boy would be okay.

Johnny had been watching Daniel fight and despite being a mouthy kid who knew all the ways to rile Johnny up, Johnny had wanted to

see what Daniel could accomplish, how much he'd changed since that first sucker punch on the beach. Then Ali ran out right before Johnny had been given the trophy to announce Daniel would fight and Johnny watched the boy hop on one leg to the mat, bruised battered, exhausted, and gravely hurt and Johnny's voice was in awe while tears pricked in Laura's eyes.

"Braver than I ever was," Johnny whispered before continuing to talk about the fight. The bloody nose and Kreese telling him to go for his knee and how that had shattered something in Johnny. He wanted to win fair and square like Bobby had wanted. He didn't want to hurt Daniel further. He didn't want to win that way. But he'd still done it because it was Kreese. It was his father figure that he trusted blindly to lead him down the right path. And he did it. And Daniel still got back up. Johnny spoke with reverence of the crane kick, to do so with an injured knee, despite how much it had hurt to be on the receiving end of that kick.

"I was relieved," Johnny said softly. "To not have won that way, to get second place felt like an honor. I started crying and I grabbed the first place trophy and gave it to Daniel and told him he was all right as his sensei and Ali and everyone else cheered him on," Johnny said with a soft smile. "I wanted to cheer him on too. Less than a year of hard work and he defeated me in the ring. That's impressive. His sensei clearly knows what he's doing."

Laura smiled nodding, but she kept the smile small, eyes falling to Johnny's neck. It still didn't explain *that* or why he hadn't come home with the second place trophy or why his bag wasn't with him.

Johnny let out a shaky breath and explained what happened after the tournament. Kreese chewing him out for losing, breaking his trophy, essentially kicking him off the team and when he protested feeling like the world had suddenly fallen apart again Kreese started chocking him, throwing off the other Cobra Kai who tried to save him, until Daniel's sensei, Mr. Miyagi had come in. He had saved Johnny's life and had dodged out of Kreese's way so Kreese's fists went straight into several car windows and how Johnny and the other cobra's had fled Kreese, quitting on the spot and how Johnny had rushed to his car and driven around before his friends could ask how he was. He hadn't wanted to talk about it. He hadn't wanted to see the pity in their faces. "Because..." And he stopped.

And she knew. They had families to return to, fathers who'd understand, and Johnny now only had Sid. He didn't say it and it hung

in the air between them. But she understood. Kreese had taken her Johnny and built him into the man before her and then tried to kill him, and Sid...well Sid wasn't better. Senior year wasn't over but Johnny no longer had karate or the Cobra Kai dojo to spend his time, to relieve his frustration or anger. He no longer had Kreese. Five years of study and making a home for himself, gone.

"I don't know what to do now," Johnny whispered into his float. His head was hung low, hair covering his face, she watched tears sparkle in the kitchen light and hit the counter. Her heart hurt.

"There are two things you have to do," Laura said carefully. "You have to apologize to Daniel and his sensei and you need to thank Mr. how do you say his name again?" she asked.

"Miyagi," Johnny said softly.

"Yes, you have to apologize and thank Mr. Miyagi. You owe them a lot for all the damage you've done, see if you can help out. You've got a lot of free time on your hands and a lot of muscle. So use it."

"They won't want to see me," Johnny said softly. "I wouldn't want to."

"You're still going to school with Daniel. You're still going to see him around until you graduate. You've got to clear the air. You didn't get to do that with Ali, you *have* to do that with Daniel. He might not forgive you, but you've got to say it. Because you feel it don't you? Sorry?" Laura asked, hoping he did. Hoping the little boy she remembered in the car next to her looking at her with big bright eyes telling her it was okay when she broke down in front of him wasn't entirely gone.

Johnny nodded.

"It's late, let them celebrate their win, then, do you know where Daniel lives?" Laura asked. She asked because she was sure he did. Johnny studied his opponents well. Knew everything he could know. And if this boy had whisked Ali away and been on Johnny's mind as much as he'd mentioned then Johnny knew where he lived.

"South Seas apartment complex in Reseda," Johnny admitted softly.

"Then tomorrow morning, you go and you apologize. You do not fight. You do not even make a fist. If he wants to hit you and you can take it you take it, but if it's going to really badly hurt you you defend. But you do not fight back. Understand?" Laura said tersely.

Johnny nodded.

Laura got up and gently cupped Johnny's head in her hands and kissed his forehead. "You can make this right. It won't be easy, but you can be better. Show them the boy... the man I know you are."

Johnny hugged her and she gently ran her hand through his hair. "I'm so sorry Johnny," she said softly. "Second place is still great."

Johnny got up early and drove the Avanti away from the big house before Sid woke up. He hurried to Reseda not wanting to lose the courage he had. His mother was right. He needed to apologize, take what licks Daniel would give him, and then find his sensei and apologize and thank him. If he was lucky the older man would tell him what the core creed of his karate was, tell him about it. He doubted they'd get that far. In his wildest dreams, he could study with Mr. Miyagi and have even an ounce of that calm fighting style that Mr. Miyagi had staring down Kreese and then playfully honking his nose.

It wasn't too early he felt as he parked the Avanti and hurried into the complex past the empty pool. It reminded him of the apartment complexes and places he'd lived with his mother before she'd met Sid. Though this seemed a little nicer. They hadn't even had a pool, empty or not. The problem was he didn't know which apartment exactly was the LaRusso's. There was an elderly woman sitting with a small dog in the courtyard and he stopped to pet the dog, scratching its chin. It wagged its tail and licked his hand. He smiled warmly pulling a treat out of his pocket. Ali used to have a dog, he still carried treats for it out of habit. It ate happily and he scratched behind the dog's ears.

"Do you know which apartment is the LaRusso's ma'am?" Johnny asked the woman.

"Apartment 20," she said jerking her thumb.

"Thank you," he said standing and saying goodbye to the dog before hurrying up the stairs. He took a deep breath, straightened his shirt and jacket, dusted himself off, fixed his hair, and then knocked. He wanted to run, but cobras didn't run. Then he remembered he wasn't a cobra anymore.

A woman with brown hair opened the door. There were similarities between her and Daniel and it took him a moment to remember her from Golf 'n Stuff and the tournament. She studied him.

"You're the boy from the tournament," she said, her voice was tight.

"Is Daniel home?" Johnny asked, feeling awkwardly like the first time he'd shown up on Ali's doorstep and her parents had answered the door to skewer him with a million questions. That time though he'd been confident. He had no confidence now, it was flagging.

"He isn't. What do you want with Daniel?" she asked stiffly.

"To apologize," he said quietly, he still stood tall, shoulders back and head held high, but he could feel her eyes on his neck and he wished he'd tried to sneak into his mother's bathroom to find her concealer.

She pushed open the door and motioned for him to come in.

"Apologize for what?" she asked.

Johnny stepped into the small apartment feeling immediate regret. He'd have to go through the same story he'd had with his mother the night before, but this was enemy territory. He'd get no understanding, no benefit from being on his side the way his mother was. Mrs. LaRusso motioned for him to sit and he sat down at the kitchen table feeling too big and out of place. The way she moved was like a tightened coil. She was making tea, keeping him in the corner of her eye.

"For a lot of things. I haven't been...I'm sorry Mrs. LaRusso, I hurt your son a lot this year and during the tournament. I quit my dojo," he said gently touching his neck.

She set the cup of tea before him looking at him with a steely gaze. "Did he get some good hits in at least?"

Johnny laughed, which hurt and he winced. "He sucker-punched me when we met, he doused me in water on Halloween... he's gotten me pretty good some times."

She nodded, "Tea's good for your throat."

He looked at her surprised, "Thank you."

"What happened?" she asked, motioning towards his neck. "I know

Daniel didn't give you that."

"My sensei," he said quietly, dropping his gaze.

"Because you didn't get first place?" she asked, voice tight.

Johnny nodded drinking the tea.

"Cobra Kai," he began after a moment, "was like home for me, but my sensei, I realize what he taught me was wrong, the core values, weren't right and I learned that because of Daniel. And I owe him and his sensei. I owe him a thousand or so apologies," Johnny said then decided to switch to what he was more comfortable with under her watchful gaze like he was a dangerous animal that could strike at any moment. "You should be proud of him Mrs. LaRusso. I've been training for years, and even injured and with less than a year under his belt, he did amazing. Your son is amazing. That kick, it hurt like hell, but it was very cool."

She smiled at this. "Daniel is cool. He's a bit small, but he's sweet and caring and friendly."

"And talkative," Johnny said.

She laughed. "Everyone in our family is talkative," she said grabbing a book and setting it down opening it, and showing Johnny a picture of their family, it was big and extensive. "Imagine, all of us talking all the time. A quiet boy like yourself probably wouldn't be able to hear himself think."

Johnny looked at the photo, "New Jersey?" he asked.

"Yes. Daniel didn't want to move here. But I got a job, and well, it's not easy being a single mother trying to raise your son."

"I understand, My mom... she's done her best and I hate that I've let her down," Johnny said softly into his tea. It really was soothing. He liked their apartment. Mrs. LaRusso had made it homey, lots of photos and knickknacks, it wasn't as cold as Sid's mansion.

"My husband died when Daniel was 8," Mrs. LaRusso said softly.

It took Johnny a moment to realize what Mrs. LaRusso was hoping for and he looked at his nails and his hands uncomfortably. "My father left. I didn't know him," he whispered.

Mrs. LaRusso's hand reached out and gently patted Johnny's hand. "You should check out Mr. Miyagi's workshop. Daniel and Mr. Miyagi might be there. You know, for you to continue your apologies."

Johnny nodded, "Thank you for the tea Mrs. LaRusso. And I'm sorry again," Johnny said standing and heading awkwardly to the door.

For a moment he'd kind of hoped to see the other pictures in her book. He wanted to see if Mr. LaRusso also looked like Daniel. What Daniel had looked like as a kid before they'd met. Had he been even smaller? What had he worn for Halloween in the years before? Surely not pretended to be a shower. Johnny was sure Daniel had been a cute kid. Maybe if they'd met back then they would've been friends. Before Johnny had found Cobra Kai. Back when he hadn't had any friends. Daniel seemed to be quick to try and make friends, but then Johnny had blocked him from keeping almost any of them except for Ali.

Mrs. LaRusso walked him to the door and gave him directions to Mr. Miyagi's workshop. Johnny thanked her and hurried down the stairs. He couldn't give up now. She hadn't warmed up to him, but she was chatty like Daniel and had opened up a bit more than he'd expected. She'd probably been hoping Daniel would bring friends home to show the pictures too and Johnny had kept that from happening. He felt cold in his stomach. He'd become the type of person he'd hated as a kid. He'd gotten stronger, sure, but he'd become the bullies who'd tormented him and he had to make it right while he still could. He found the door to Mr. Miyagi's workshop and knocked gently.

"Come in," Mr. Miyagi said.

Johnny carefully pushed open the door with the wooden chimes. He scanned the crowded room. There were several little trees around. They were stunning, elegant, and delicate. He was so distracted by them that he hadn't noticed Mr. Miyagi was watching him and waiting. Johnny met his gaze after a while and felt a lump in his throat. He didn't know what to say. Thank you seemed too small.

"They're beautiful," he said about the trees.

"Bonsai," Mr. Miyagi said.

"Bonsai," Johnny repeated testing the word out on his tongue. "Mr. Miyagi, sir..." If his heart was pounding this much just to thank Mr. Miyagi then what would he do when he apologized to Daniel? He felt for a moment like it would've been easier if no one had stopped Kreese. But easy wasn't his way. He worked hard and had for years.

He could do this. "Thank you for everything," he said.

"Everything?" Mr. Miyagi repeated confused.

"Saving me. Saving Daniel," Johnny said, he'd been thinking it over since Halloween. He'd been grateful to watch the elderly man jump over the fence and put a stop to the fight. He remembered being so stunned and so relieved he'd barely fought back. "Thank you for stopping the fight... stopping me. And for stopping Kreese," he said working his way over the lump in his throat. He didn't talk too much, and all these apologies, thank yous, and explanations were going to make him lose what little voice he had left.

Mr. Miyagi stepped forward, "No bad students, only bad teachers."

Johnny shook his head, tears pricking in his eyes, "No, I've been awful. I owe you an apology. I'm sorry Mr. Miyagi. If I can do anything to help you, just name it."

Mr. Miyagi looked at him thoughtfully then picked up his tool bag and placed it in Johnny's hands. "Follow."

Johnny did, following Mr. Miyagi around the apartment complex. At first, he stood awkwardly behind him, but Mr. Miyagi told him what to do, and he found himself helping fix sinks, changing light bulbs, working with pipes and plumbing, holding the ladder for him, and then quickly asking if maybe he should be the one to go up the ladder instead, worried for the old man. It felt good to be working and not thinking. Add to it that he was fixing things and it felt right. He felt calmer than he had in a while and he realized it was all Mr. Miyagi.

At home, at the dojo, at school, Johhny always felt a bundle of energy, coiled and ready to spring. At home it was in case Sid was in a bad mood, he either had to fight and defend himself or bolt and hide somewhere, at the dojo he had to jump at Kreese's command and it usually was straight into fighting, at school it was to keep his head above water with teachers and with his friends and Ali. But he'd seen Mr. Miyagi fight. Mr. Miyagi could handle his own. He didn't need Johnny to defend him and he'd even gone out of his way to defend Johnny. Johnny who'd proved himself to be utterly irredeemable. He moved quietly and calmly and this brought ease to Johnny.

He felt safe he realized, even though he was on top of a ladder clearing out gutters. It was so shocking when he realized he almost never felt safe. Kreese had taught him to always be on high alert, that danger could come from anywhere. But here, with Mr. Miyagi it was

so peaceful, he wasn't worried or concerned. He could relax. Mr. Miyagi was in charge and he could just follow the quiet directions he gave. It felt good to work with his hands even though they still ached from yesterday.

Mr. Miyagi invited him back into the workshop and poured him tea. Johnny sat and took it gratefully studying the small bonsai trees. Mr. Miyagi put on a pair of glasses and took a pair of tiny sheers and went to work, carefully pruning and directing one of the small trees. Johnny watched fascinated, sipping at his tea.

"Daniel-san is with Ali," Mr. Miyagi said softly, "still celebrate big win."

Johnny could feel the man's eyes on him, watching him for any giveaway. It still stung. Ali hadn't let him explain why he'd missed her birthday, hadn't explained why suddenly *that* had been the last straw. What in him was so worthless all of a sudden after two years? He wanted to know if he'd been as terrible all along and she'd just been patient right up until the end. If she knew he was becoming something awful and jumped ship while she could.

"They uh doing okay?" Johnny asked awkwardly.

"Daniel-san still learning not to leave beautiful lady waiting."

Johnny laughed and Mr. Miyagi looked at him with the smallest amount of surprise. "Sorry, that's just how I lost Ali apparently. We haven't had a chance to discuss it but she said it's because I didn't show up at her birthday party."

Mr. Miyagi nodded solemnly. "Important to show up."

Johnny nodded and they fell back into companionable silence until there were more things to do. Mr. Miyagi handed a list over to Johnny. "Shopping next," he said.

Johnny nodded taking the list and following Mr. Miyagi out. He thought about suggesting the Avanti but Mr. Miyagi beelined straight to his truck, then hopped up in the passenger seat looking expectantly at Johnny. Johnny was surprised, he never let anyone drive the Avanti, even Ali. Cars were important and letting him drive was putting their lives in his hands. For a moment that felt like too much. He swallowed and carefully opened the door.

No wonder Daniel liked his sensei so much. He barely said anything

but what he said was important and worth listening to and the things he did spoke louder than any words Johnny could even try to think of. He hopped into the truck. From the outside, the truck didn't look like much but Johnny could see how well cared for it was. It moved easily beneath his hands on the way to the hardware store. There he carried a basket and followed Mr. Miyagi around as he picked out things he needed, different pieces of supplies, hmming over different brands and new things before picking them up and looking them over and picking out which one he thought was best. Johnny felt like he was a kid again, following his mother around in the grocery store, her hmming though had been in relation to what was on sale and if they could get a discount on any dinged cans, trying to figure out what they could afford.

"You wax car before?" Mr. Miyagi asked thoughtfully.

"I wax my Avanti about every three months," Johnny said.

"Good good," Mr. Miyagi said like he'd remembered something and set the can of wax down. "How do you wax your car?"

Johnny frowned wondering what Mr. Miyagi was talking about before slipping the basket down to the ground and showing him the movement he made. Wide circles then smaller circles, one side then the other. Mr. Miyagi nodded his approval and turned his back to look at sandpaper. Johnny quickly picked up the basket and followed him, feeling like he was lumbering after the smaller elderly man. They worked their way through the last of Mr. Miyagi's list before checking out and returning to the truck, Johnny's hands full of bags that he set gingerly between the two of them in the truck bed and drove back towards South Seas apartment complex.

There was a yellow car, a Ford super de luxe sitting sparkling near Johnny's Avanti and Johnny tensed. That was Daniel's car. He had to take care of this now. Had to apologize as soon as possible. He carefully parked the truck and Mr. Miyagi hopped out. Johnny filled his arms with the bags and locked the truck following the man trying to think of what to say. *I was an ass. I beat the shit out of you and could've killed you I'm so sorry.* No definitely not. *How's the leg, Daniel? I could probably carry you around as penitence.* There was no way Daniel would let him carry him around, even as an apology for making his knee worse. *Hit me hard, however you want, I deserve it.* For some reason, he doubted Daniel would just haul off and start beating him up. That was more of a Cobra Kai thing, more of Kreese.

His throat ached at the thought. He felt sick to his stomach thinking that the dojo was there, that some other unsuspecting kid like himself who was drowning would reach out and take Kreese's hand and listen to his promise. The promise to make him stronger and smarter and braver but really he'd grind the kid into a pulp and reshape him into something darker. Or what Johnny feared the most, find the darkness already inside and just bring it to the surface.

He followed Mr. Miyagi into the shop and Daniel was there, studying one of the bonsai carefully and talking to Mr. Miyagi about where he'd taken Ali.

"Here," Mr. Miyagi told Johnny and Daniel stopped what he was doing and turned, going stiff all over, eyes wide and looking from Mr. Miyagi to Johnny. Johnny grimaced internally. Daniel was checking to make sure his sensei was safe so close to the wild beast he thought of as Johnny. A monster. Did all teenagers feel like monsters or was it just Johnny? He felt like Frankenstein's Monster, scared of fire and lashing out hurting people. Johnny set the things down where Mr. Miyagi told him to.

"Talk," Mr. Miyagi said before putting away the things in the bags, moving around his workshop.

"LaRusso," Johnny began uneasily. "I'm sorry man, for everything. Your knee, the soccer team tryouts, your bike, pushing you off the edge so you fell," this was a long list, he took a deep breath, "Halloween, the night on the beach," he wanted to say some of it was also Daniel's fault but he could hear his mother's voice in his head. *Apologize completely, excuses will just add oil to the fire and turn it into a nightmare to clean up.* "Ali," he managed to stumble over her name uneasily, "I'm sorry, and if there's anything I can do for the rest of the semester before we graduate. Stay out of your way, out of sight, to make it easier, whatever, let me know."

Johnny couldn't look at Daniel, he was thinking of Kreese. He wanted to know why he wasn't good enough, why he couldn't have been okay with second place, or third place. Why Kreese had decided that he was no longer useful and better off dead. He gently brought his fingers to his throat, tears pricking his eyes. This wasn't how an apology was supposed to go. He should be saying something comforting.

"I'm not in Cobra Kai anymore," he said softly.

He could still feel Kreese's arm around his neck, the way he'd

struggled to get him off, but not enough. For half a second he'd thought it'd been a joke, Kreese used to put them in headlocks all the time. Johnny had been in headlocks for lessons, but it hadn't been a joke. That hadn't really cut through until he'd heard his friends cry out and plead with Kreese. Until he'd felt the stiffness of muscles around his neck not relaxing like they always did before. Daniel usually talked a mile a minute. Daniel drove their teachers nuts with his incessant talking. He'd seen one teacher roll their eyes. But Daniel was quiet. Too quiet. Was Johnny talking to himself? Apologizing to tiny trees?

Daniel was watching him from the stool he himself had occupied hours before, hands on the edge of the seat between his legs that dangled. His expression was unreadable in the fading sunlight of the day. His eyes were dark.

Once one of the kids at one of the tournaments he'd been in apologize to their sensei on their knees, head bowed to the mat. He'd never seen an apology so deep and physical. He'd laughed at first because his friends had laughed but now he wondered if that sort of deep apology was necessary now. Like bowing to a king, offering your support in their battles. Did this make him a turncoat? He'd always thought it was cowardice to change sides in the middle of battle, but he was tired. He wasn't fighting anymore. There was no battle or war. And all the thoughts rumbling around in his head wasn't helping. He thought about what he'd told his mother, what he'd told LaRusso's mother.

"Your crane kick was really cool," Johnny said softly. "And all the progress you've made in less than a year. Congratulations LaRusso, on your win. I mean it. Really."

Daniel dipped his head, looking at his hands on the chair and Johnny wondered if that was the wrong thing to say. He didn't know what to do. He'd never talked this much around Daniel before ever. Daniel had never listened so intently. He was used to Daniel mouthing off, a constant stream of nothing and everything. Eventually, Daniel looked up and met Johnny's gaze.

"If you really want to do what I want, then leave. I don't want to see you ever again."

"Daniel-san," Mr. Miyagi said gently and Johnny didn't hear what else, dipping out of the workshop and hurrying towards his car.

He didn't know what he'd wanted Daniel to say. Part of him had hoped, after a small taste of the peace that emanated from being at

Mr. Miyagi's side that maybe he'd be lucky. Maybe he'd be forgiven and could still practice karate. But not Kreese's karate, Mr. Miyagi's. Maybe he'd be allowed to stick around, repair what he'd broken, given a second chance. Maybe explain himself, bubble up with the excuses, maybe not now but in the future when they could laugh about it over beers or whatever it was Daniel might drink, martini maybe? *Hey, remember that semester when you used to beat the shit out of me our senior year?* Daniel would ask laughing. *What was with that?*

And Johnny would frown into his beer and unleash everything. A torrent of his life with Sid, his mistakes, the loss of Ali so suddenly, and how Daniel had found him at his absolute worst. He'd hold it all in until that moment and maybe Daniel would nod, be sympathetic, understanding of how sometimes you find yourself on the wrong path and can't figure out how to get on the right one, especially when no one is there to help you find it, and the people you think are leading you are sending you further and further away from the right path into all-consuming and choking darkness.

Johnny looked at the South Seas apartment complex disappearing in the rearview mirror. Then something caught his eye. Something was in his backseat. At a red light, he blinked and looked back. A small tree was sitting in his backseat with an envelope. Tears pricked his eyes. It's the one he'd been looking at when he'd told Mr. Miyagi they were beautiful. Daniel was so damn lucky to have that man in his life, to guide him down the right path. Johnny took a deep shaky breath, he'd promised himself he'd do whatever Daniel asked of him as atonement. And while he didn't know a lot about his own dad, he could do the same thing he did. He'd made it look easy after all. He too could just disappear.

Perfect Attendance Thrown Out the Window

Daniel was thinking of the look on Johnny's face as he apologized. It *seemed* real. It *seemed* genuine. The dim glow of the setting sun had made the marks around his neck look more severe and yet fake all at once. He thought of the way Johnny kept absently putting his hand to his neck as if to remind himself there wasn't anything around it, trying to choke him. The way he seemed so broken and sad. He'd quit. Daniel felt like he should've been overjoyed by that admission, that turn of events, but it just left something sour in his stomach.

He remembered seeing Johnny from a distance, struggling for air, so shocked, just like he'd seen Johnny look shocked as his sensei had talked to him outside the mat after brushing blood from his nose. All he'd ever wanted was for Johnny to leave him alone. Maybe asking for a truce after sucker-punching someone wasn't the way to start things off, but Daniel tried not to think about that night. Tried not to think about how desperately Johnny tried to talk to Ali, the same way he'd done so at the arcade a few months ago. Trying to get her to listen to him and give him a second chance. But there wasn't another Daniel there to block him from doing so, just her and her friends and he wore her down.

He'd thought it over multiple times. What if Daniel hadn't been there on that beach? Would Ali have melted back into Johnny's arms the way she had done to Daniel? Would Johnny have ever even noticed Daniel? It twisted something in his gut. He knew his own intentions with Ali, his own reasons and wishes, and Johnny, well who was to say why Johnny had wanted to talk to Ali. He remembered hearing Johnny look at him, praising him and he wondered, what if they could've been friends?

What if in their English class Johnny had seen his booklet on how to learn karate and struck up a conversation about that with him? What if he'd been able to scrape up enough money to join Cobra Kai with Johnny and his buddies? But the what-ifs weren't reality and it hurt his head to think about. He remembered telling Johnny to leave and Mr. Miyagi coming up quietly at his side with his "Daniel-san" and soft words about forgiveness and how anger poisons and how people can change and become better if you let them. Only for him to sigh. Mr. Miyagi was right, always right, but Johnny was gone when he looked back. Had disappeared remarkably without setting off the wooden chimes at the door.

Mr. Miyagi had frowned deeply, "Johnny-san in lots of pain. Learning one's teacher is bad hurts. Learning one's path is wrong is difficult. Asking for forgiveness is very brave. Asking for help takes courage."

Daniel hadn't figured out what he'd meant by that last part. Johnny hadn't asked for help. But Mr. Miyagi always saw differently.

And the way he'd come in, arms full of shopping for Mr. Miyagi meant they'd spent a lot of time together so maybe Mr. Miyagi had learned something else. Maybe Johnny had come and asked for help to change and then Daniel had sent him packing with his cold tone. Mr. Miyagi was disappointed in him even though he didn't say it. Daniel could feel it. Mr. Miyagi was too forgiving if anything. Daniel needed time. Which is what he told Mr. Miyagi. He'd try to forgive Johnny if he really did turn over a new leaf. He figured school would be the best place to find out if that was true.

But no matter how much he looked for Johnny, he couldn't find him. He had perfected a Johnny radar early on in the school year. He knew where Johnny was at all times. He had picked up on his frequency. Knew the sound of his footsteps in the hall when they were the only ones around, could pick his voice out of a crowd and run the other way. But as he strained to listen for him, to try and find his blonde head above the rest he couldn't. His desk in their shared classes was empty and the teachers frowned during role call, murmuring to themselves "that's strange" as if the sudden loss of the blonde was more shocking and had left a void. The cobras were still in school, he saw them from time to time, heard them. But they stayed away from him. Kept their distance.

"Earth to Daniel," Ali said from across him at their cafeteria table.

"Oh, sorry," Daniel said. "What were you saying?"

"I was telling you about the movie we're going to see tonight."

"Oh, right," Daniel said.

"What's wrong?" Ali asked with a sigh. "I know that look, it's the I'm going to bolt look you always got when you saw Johnny. Johnny's not here."

"Yeah," Daniel said. "He's not."

"He's probably at home licking his wounded pride," she said with a laugh. "From that kick to the face. It was so satisfying to see."

"Yeah," Daniel said chasing some peas around his tray. "So the movie, huh?"

She started talking about the film again and Daniel wondered why he cared. Johnny wasn't at school. He should be happy. He should be relaxed. The knot in his stomach shouldn't be there. But Daniel was worried. What if Mr. Miyagi was right? He usually was. Maybe telling Johnny he never wanted to see his face was like slapping the hand of a drowning man rather than helping him out. Daniel didn't want to be that person. He wasn't that person.

Daniel waited for Johnny to come back to school. The week progressed and the teacher's frowns deepened. Ali even was quiet at lunch and in their class, the one where she played buffer between Daniel and Johnny and a few of his cobras the previous semester.

"You know," she said quietly. "Johnny's never missed a day of school before. He used to boast about his perfect attendance. He's nearly always on time for everything. You could set your time to Johnny."

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked feeling a coldness in his stomach.

Ali sighed, "When we dated, Johnny was always early. Every date, early. He was so reliable. If I asked him to pick me up, he was always there. Never missed a damn thing. He had all these awards at home, little gifts from schools and teachers about not missing a single day. We didn't go to the same schools growing up, so I didn't know him before high school. But he was so proud of it. I tried to get him to skip once. There was this event at the mall and I wanted to go. And he said he wouldn't miss school. He came to school stoned, hungover, bruised and battered, but never missed a day. Until this week. A day, sure, a guy who lost so badly and with so much damn pride might miss a day. But more than one day...that's not normal for Johnny. He's never missed anything, except my birthday."

Daniel looked at Ali. For as long as they had dated she'd never said a nice thing about Johnny but now she looked concerned. He glanced across their shared classroom at the few cobras in their room. At the empty seat where Johnny was supposed to be. They were frowning, but they weren't looking at Daniel. It was like Daniel didn't exist to them. They didn't look at him ever. Didn't say hello, if they nearly bumped into him in the hall they spun out of the way and kept going. Which Daniel knew because he'd tested it. He'd stopped directly in front of Jimmy and the boy had quickly sidestepped and spun past him, eyes glancing off of him and not saying a word. Tommy did the

same thing.

Johnny must've taken what Daniel had said literally. There had been a hint of desperation in his voice when he'd asked for Daniel to tell him what to do. Daniel hadn't let that sink in. He'd been too on edge. He'd been too unnerved to see his sensei walk in followed by that giant who looked like he was carved from marble. He'd been at the other end of those fists, of those feet and to see him following Mr. Miyagi had sent panic through him. To see him casually in a space he considered safe had upset him. Even if everything was over.

Months ago if you'd told Daniel that there'd be a week where Johnny was gone Daniel would've celebrated. Demand it be declared a national holiday. Or Daniel *thought* he would've. But he missed seeing Johnny in class. Missed watching him roll his eyes as Daniel asked his fifteenth question in history class, or in English class. Missed debating him over allegories and showing off in science. They'd fallen into an academic rivalry and Daniel missed it even though he'd darted out of class first and always asked to be near the door so he could avoid Johnny in the halls.

"He missed your birthday?" Daniel asked, trying to hold onto the information Ali was supplying them. She had always been vague about her relationship with Johnny.

She sighed, "I'd made this big deal out of my birthday, and because he's always so punctual... when he didn't show up I thought he'd gotten hurt on that stupid bike of his. I panicked. I spent the whole night darting over near the phone to see if he'd called, waiting for him to call and he never did. Because if Johnny couldn't make it for some reason he always called. And he didn't. I got so worried I made myself sick. Then I heard he'd been out drinking with friends. Him and those damn cobras," Ali said bitterly. "I never wanted to put myself through that again. If Johnny was going to start binge drinking and driving I couldn't be the girl waiting worried he was going to crash into a ditch. I couldn't be the girl worried he was going to die because of the stupid Cobra Kai creeds that kept getting him into fights and worried it'd send him to an early grave. So I dumped him," Ali said. "And he kept proving himself to be an asshole, I mean look what he did when you showed up."

Daniel frowned. "Did he ever say why he got drunk?"

"Who cares?" Ali said flipping her hair. "I promised myself I'd stop worrying about him and here we are worrying about him. Whatever

reason, it's not good enough. I don't care."

Daniel bit back his response. He wanted to know. He wanted to know why Johnny wasn't at school. Was it because of him, or like she'd said, had he gotten into a fight bigger than himself? Had Kreese shown up to finish the job? Daniel needed answers.

Ali sighed, "I hope his step-father didn't do anything to him."

"Huh?" Daniel said pulling himself back.

"Sid. He's a dick," Ali said before the teacher shushed them.

Daniel couldn't get her to elaborate on that so he spent his day coming up with a plan. Apparently, Johnny hiding from him wasn't what Daniel wanted at all, and tanking his senior year on Daniel's behalf just made him feel worse. So Daniel sweet-talked the lady at the front desk to get Johnny's address, with a whole bunch of missed school work as an excuse, and drove the Ford Super De Luxe to Johnny's house. He found his way past Ali's and deeper into the Hills, finding himself sweating and nervous. These were nice houses, with nice breakable things in them that cost more than anything Daniel owned. He could already see himself talking to Johnny's mother, awkwardly and then stumbling and sending some priceless vase onto the floor to be smashed into smithereens. It was a good thing he never went into Ali's house. He'd already destroyed part of their brickwork outside. Maybe that was why they never invited him in.

The house was big. The red Avanti wasn't there and Daniel frowned. He'd still try. Maybe there was somewhere else to park. He gathered up the books as an excuse, all the notes, and homework and hurried up the front steps ringing the doorbell and shifting uneasily from one foot to the next, a ball of nervous energy. What if it was a trap? What if Johnny was home and was going to beat the shit out of him? Maybe it was all a lie? Or maybe he'd run away. Maybe he had been drinking and then driven himself into a ravine and was concussed somewhere out there, bleeding out in the Avanti and no one knew? Okay, he had to stop. The door opened and a man in what Daniel could only describe as a butler's outfit looked down his nose at him.

"Here to see the young worthless bastard of the house?" the man asked after taking one look at him.

Daniel's brain froze. The words out of the man's mouth didn't match up with anything he'd expected by looking at him. Who opened a door and asked that?

"Er, Johnny?" Daniel asked.

The man nodded, one quick movement. "The bastard is not currently home."

"Could you-"

"No," the man said. Then paused and looked down at Daniel and at his arms full of books and dropped his voice. "If you'd like to see the lady of the house instead she could." His eyes snapped back up to look out past Daniel. He was waiting.

"Uh, yes please," Daniel said. "Could I see the lady of the house?" he said repeating what he'd said.

"Of course," the man said breaking into a smile and walking off briskly across shiny marble floors and Daniel had to hurry to keep up. The place was massive. Art was everywhere, the halls and ceilings were vast and brightly lit.

"A guest for you miss," the man said, knocking on a door.

Daniel heard a women's voice respond before the man opened the door and then left.

Daniel found himself standing before a beautiful woman and he saw where Johnny got it. If Johnny was carved from marble she was the blueprint, the beautiful sketch, a painting that Daniel would've expected to see in a museum. She looked up at him, taking him in, taking the visual, and comparing it to her mental checklists. He wasn't a cobra, so who was he seemed to be the question on her brow.

"Daniel LaRusso?" she asked after a while.

Daniel was stunned. He'd never told his mother about Johnny. Never mentioned the six-foot-tall blonde boy with striking blue eyes that beat him up on the regular. But apparently, Johnny had given his mother enough of a description about the boy he beat up for her to pin a name to a face in one go. What had he said *Scrawny small dark-haired kid who looks like a dork?*

"Yes Mrs. Lawrence," Daniel said softly.

She nodded, "What brings you here? I thought you didn't want to see Johnny?"

Of all the things Daniel thought about Johnny, being a Mama's boy was not one of them. He'd never thought that Johnny talked to his mother about anything. Heck Daniel tried to avoid talking to his own mother about most things, especially about Johnny. And here Johnny had apparently caught his mother up on everything Daniel related.

"I, is he okay?" Daniel asked, it felt like a stupid question as soon as it left his mouth.

She shrugged. "I don't know," she said.

Daniel frowned at that. How could she not know? She knew Daniel had banished him, who Daniel was on sight alone but didn't know how her own son was doing.

She studied him for a moment, "How would you be?" she asked. It was pointed. *Oh* Daniel thought. She meant Kreese. She meant the end of the cobras, she meant the mark around Johnny's neck. She meant the feeling of the world crumbling around you.

"Not great," Daniel admitted.

"He's a good kid," Laura said. To her it was a fact, she wouldn't let Daniel refute it. "He's made mistakes. Lots around you it seems."

Daniel frowned. How honest had Johnny been? He'd lied to his mother about his own bruises.

"I looked it up, by the way, that kick you did?" Laura said. "Apparently it's against the rules."

"I don't think kicking someone's hurt knee is a good way to go either," Daniel said tensely.

He didn't like where this was going. The playing field was uneven. He'd been thrown and she was making it hard, it was getting away from him, the same way every interaction with Johnny seemed to ever go.

"Mrs. Lawrence, I just wanted to check in on him, give him his homework, tell him to come to school."

Damn it, he hadn't meant to say that last bit, what if she didn't know he was coming to school? That'd be an ass-kicking for sure.

The door opened and a man leaned against the doorway. He wore a

suit and though he wasn't muscular like Johnny he gave off an air of danger that only a rich person could do. Someone who looked at people like ants and took joy in stomping them out. His eyes traveled to Daniel and gave him a once over.

"Whose this pipsqueak?" he asked. "Not here to see that brat is he?"

"No, of course not Sid," Laura said soothingly, eyes darting behind Sid to a servant who was motioning to her and she nodding putting her hand on Daniel's shoulder "He's doing a project for the country club, had some questions for me."

Sid laughed, "Oh good." He leaned towards Daniel lowering his voice, "Listen, don't hang out with Johnny. He's a bad egg, absolutely going to be a worthless deadbeat just like his father. You don't want to get mixed up in that. Worthless kid, I should've sent him packing as soon as his shadow darkened my doorstep. The only good thing he ever did was date that Mills girl and he couldn't even keep hold of her," he laughed. "Oh and the karate, but the boys a quitter always has been always will be. He's probably going to just die in a gutter one day." He threw an arm around Daniel and pulled him from the room and into the hall. "Listen, you probably know him from school right? He's an idiot. Won't make anything out of his life, like a kid like you will. Show him his place if you know what I mean. I mean his newest hobby seems to be gardening, what teenage boy picks gardening?"

"Sid?" Laura called and Sid stopped, turning his head back to the room.

"Yeah?"

"Let the servants walk him out," she said smiling.

Even Daniel could tell it was plastered on and fake. But the arm around his shoulder full of threat left and a servant came to his side, saying nothing. Daniel followed, finding himself going up a spiral staircase and a door opened and a hand pushing him in before the door shut with a click behind him.

Daniel blinked in confusion. He thought they were taking him to the front door. He held the books to his chest and heard movement. He whirled and there was Johnny looking at him in shock. He was standing, clearly hiding something behind him. There was panic in his eyes that Daniel had only seen when Kreese- Daniel tore his eyes away from Johnny and looked around the room. There were band posters on the wall, all rock bands, books on the shelves, and a large bed.

Piles of cassettes sat around and a Walkman sat on the desk that Johnny was leaning against. The light on his desk was on and Johnny was trying to block something on it from Daniel's view. A dirty magazine Daniel thought. Had to be. Here Daniel had been worried that he'd messed up. Sent an already spiraling boy into a deeper spiral but he'd just used it as an excuse to stay home and jerk off. He should've known better to let pity and concern find root.

"I brought your homework," Daniel said holding out the books.

Johnny didn't move.

"Listen if it's porn, whatever," Daniel said, "Just take the homework will ya?"

Johnny looked torn then stepped forward carefully and Daniel caught a wisp of green from where Johnny had moved. It wasn't a dirty magazine. It was a tree. It was a bonsai, one of Mr. Miyagi's bonsai's from the workshop. He recognized that one. Remembered watching Mr. Miyagi work on it.

"Why are you hiding one of Mr. Miyagi's bonsai's?" Daniel asked stepping forward towards Johnny.

"He gave it to me," Johnny said quickly scooping the bonsai up and setting it on a shelf, out of reach. Only just. Daniel looked at the bonsai and then at Johnny. The bruise around his neck was fading. But he had bags under his eyes and looked tired. Rung out. It took Daniel a moment because it didn't make sense. Johnny was protecting the bonsai from Daniel. In what world did that make sense? Daniel loved the bonsai, all the little trees Mr. Miyagi made. He and his mother even had their own. He remembered Sid's words then. *Gardening*. Was this what he'd meant? Had Johnny spent the week tending and caring for one of Mr. Miyagi's bonsai?

"I-what do you think I'm going to do?" Daniel asked.

Johnny didn't respond. Daniel stepped closer, moving to get a closer look at the desk, at the pair of small shears, a stack of books on bonsai, a few brochures on schools, a pamphlet on taking the GED, a letter gently laid out in what looked like Mr. Miyagi's hand writing. Johnny turned with him.

"Do you seriously think *I,* who've watched Mr. Miyagi work on bonsai for hours, would do something to a tiny tree?" Daniel asked feeling incredulous.

"Thought you were Sid," Johnny said quietly, but he still didn't move, keeping himself between Daniel and the bonsai.

Daniel frowned, he didn't like that thought. Didn't like the implication. How bad was Sid? He felt his skin go cold. Was this Johnny's life? Kreese trying to kill him and living under a roof with Sid the- the what? Bonsai murderer? Johnny's shoulders were tense.

"I didn't steal it," Johnny said quietly.

"I know man, Mr. Miyagi gave it to you right?" Daniel asked. There was a look like the understanding was a thrown lifeline. The shoulders drooped and the uneasy atmosphere lessened. Johnny took a breath, arms folding across his chest, not in the way he usually did look down at Johnny, but with his fingers digging into his muscles as if he needed to hold onto himself.

"Yeah, he did," Johnny said.

Daniel sighed, Johnny never made anything easy. He'd thought he'd waltz in and Johnny would be pissed to see him and they'd start bickering like always and they'd fight and Daniel would know the Johnny in his head was the right one and he'd tell him to stop moping over losing and come back to school. But this wasn't the Johnny in his head. The Johnny in his head didn't protect bonsai or read up on them, he didn't study even though he did okay in class, he didn't skip school because Daniel told him he didn't want to see him ruining his perfect attendance. He did live in a big mansion but didn't hide in his room trying to protect a plant from his stepfather. He didn't get worried about what Daniel thought, that on top of bully Daniel would just add thief to the list. He moved towards the desk and dropped down all the homework onto it with a loud thud.

The Johnny in his head was always confident, always full of biting remarks, and never this sad boy in front of him with marks on his neck that made Daniel's fingers want to curl into fists and find Kreese and give him a good hit or five. But he feared if he let his fingers curl into fists if he let the anger he felt simmering in his blood turn into a boil Johnny would misconstrue it and he already had that frightened animal in a cage feeling. He looked almost as if he was trying to stop himself from grabbing the bonsai and jumping out the window.

"Thanks," Johnny said, flipping open one of the folders and seeing the notes from their teacher. "But I can..."

"Be at school man," Daniel said.

He wanted to put his hand on Johnny's shoulder but it felt like a bear trap. Daniel wanted to make sure he was okay but he was scared he'd get bitten by a sleeping cobra. So he slipped his hand into the jeans of his pocket, trying to be nonchalant. "Can't believe you let your perfect attendance go out the window."

Johnny blinked at him, a momentary spark of surprise, but the emotions he'd let through earlier had all slid away behind a mask. He was unreadable.

"It's fine," Johnny said.

It was awkward now. Daniel wanted to ask questions. He was burning with them. But they weren't friends sitting in a café chatting over coffee or at a diner eating burgers and drinking shakes. But he had to say something.

"I need time," Daniel said, "You made my life hell. But schools important. Graduating is important, don't just skip and get your GED. Your worrying everyone. I can't have that on my conscious Johnny. You don't have to hide. You will come to school right?"

Johnny wasn't looking at him, was fiddling with the folder on his desk. "Okay," he said.

Daniel turned and headed to the door. If he didn't hurry he wouldn't be able to keep his hands to himself any longer. He wanted to lift Johnny's chin and ask him to stop curling in on himself, to stand up straight like he always did. But that was not what rivals did. Not what enemies did. Johnny would punch him in the face. He paused at the door.

"I'll tell Mr. Miyagi you're taking good care of the bonsai," he said quickly before dipping out in a hurry.

Clinging to a Bonsai like a Life Preserver

Johnny stared where Daniel had left and looked up at the tree he'd carefully set on the shelf. It'd been automatic. Just like everything. He'd spent the week trying to do the opposite of what the voice of Kreese in his head said. The voice told him to go to school and pummel anyone who looked at him weird, who glanced at his neck and the bruises on his face or knuckles. He'd told his mom he wasn't going to school because he couldn't talk much. It hurt to do so. And she'd looked at him full of concern and asked if it was really because Daniel had said he hadn't wanted to see him. It was part of it, sure. But he also didn't trust himself. He didn't trust himself not to hear Daniel say something stupid and for it to set him off like a bunch of firecrackers on the fourth of July. He didn't need to add more things to his list of apologies for the boy. He didn't want to start a new feud either. Which he also feared would happen. That he'd take all that pent-up anger and frustration and direct it at some other kid who crossed his path.

He needed to calm down. So he called the cobras and told him he wouldn't be at school for a while, made them promise to leave Daniel alone, and then buried himself in taking care of the bonsai and researching what he could do. He could take is GED, he could tap into his emergency fund and go somewhere else. Every day he put the tree in the passenger seat of his car and would drive around with it, hoping it'd get enough sunlight, more than it would in his room, and tried to think. It was weird, he knew it was weird for a teenage boy to be driving a bonsai around the city but he also didn't want to leave the plant at home alone. Sid had destroyed most of Johnny's things. Most of the things Sid had gotten him himself. The drums he'd bought so Johnny could take lessons got smashed, the magic set was set on fire, the list continued on and on. Karate required Johnny to be out of the house at a dojo so it was one of the few things Sid hadn't been able to get his hands on and take away when the mood struck him. The bonsai tree however was another story and Johnny would be damned before he let Sid get his hands on it.

The Kreese in his head told him to always look for weakness in others and get rid of his own weakness. The Avanti was a weakness. Johnny loved his car. But it was worth more to Sid in good shape than not. It was worth more for Johnny to have a way out of the house than to stick around and be underfoot, or darkening his doorstep like a leech or parasite like Sid usually said. But the bonsai was a true weakness.

Without meaning to, Johnny had thrown himself into caring for the small tree. It was a target. Kreese, who gave the kids pet mice to care for then made them feed it to a snake would've taken one look at that tree and ripped it in half telling Johnny not to have such an easy weakness to exploit. So when Daniel had shown up instead of Sid Johnny expected his comeuppance. He'd expected Daniel to see the tree and think Johnny had stolen it and then taken it back. It's what Kreese would've done. It's what the cobras had been taught to do. There was no mercy in Cobra Kai.

Johnny reached up and carefully pulled the tree down off the shelf and studied its branches. He'd broken many boards in his life, destroyed plenty of wood, he'd walked through forests where the trees towered over him for Kreese's lessons in fighting, the times they turned into field trips like some demented capture the flag. But he'd never seen trees so small he could hold them on his lap. Something ancient and small that needed care and attention to grow and thrive. Something that needed him. Mr. Miyagi's note was basic care instructions with his name at the top so that Johnny knew it wasn't a fluke. Maybe Johnny would work with trees, maybe with plants. He liked the idea of doing something calming and peaceful, helping things grow. It felt better than crushing them. There was more reward in it. He'd been growing a small patch of flowers in the garden over the years, hidden from Sid. He pretended not to notice them, but the simple curve and bloom of the fuchsia brought him a small spark of pride every year when he saw them bloom.

He sat down at his desk and opened the books, looking at the homework he'd been given. He'd lost his perfect attendance, something he'd hoped to continue until he graduated. But he hadn't expected Daniel to know that he'd thrown that away. That Daniel would've even cared. He'd said he needed time. Maybe that night at a bar in their future could be a reality. Maybe they could get through this year without any more fights. Maybe Johnny could be redeemed and maybe he could spend time with Mr. Miyagi again. A small seed of hope was blooming and he didn't know whether to crush it before he could be let down, crushed and destroyed by reality, or to let it bloom.

Maybe karate didn't have to be over, maybe he could study with Daniel and Mr. Miyagi. It felt like too big of an ask. Too big of a dream for someone who'd tormented Daniel for a whole semester. It had felt like a game of tug of war and sometimes Daniel yanked him over the line and sometimes he yanked Daniel over the line, and sometimes Daniel just popped up like a mole in a whack a mole game

to torment him back when he thought the tug of war was over. His mother had looked at the picture from the final tournament and being his mother had looked through the rules about the crane kick and how it wasn't allowed. An illegal move she said. It amused Johnny, it meant technically neither of them had won. Their fight wasn't over and a part of him wanted to try again, let them spar, on an even field without the animosity or anger. He wanted to know who was better when they weren't fighting for their lives. The game wasn't over, but he wouldn't push it. He wouldn't even mention it.

Johnny returned to school, showing up early. He hadn't known what to do with the bonsai. He needed somewhere safe to keep it while he was at school. He was safe at school from Sid, but his things weren't. Sid came home sometimes from Lorimar and if he was pissed he'd take it out on anything that wasn't his. Or at least he'd bought but didn't care for. So Johnny had brought the plant to school and hurried through the courtyard to the greenhouse the science classes used. He'd keep it there during the week, hidden among all the other plants. The teacher who used it was the one who'd given him the start for his fuchsia and Johnny felt like he could trust the teacher to not do anything to his bonsai.

He hurried back to the door taking another look at the bonsai. Maybe it was a bad idea. Everyone he'd trusted had let him down. What if the teacher overwatered it? What if some punk came in and destroyed everything? His unwitting bonsai included? What if it was too hot in here in the middle of the afternoon and his tree died? Johnny pushed down the small panic, what was he a dad dropping their kid off in kindergarten for the first time? He was a black belt in karate. He could leave a tree in a greenhouse while he was in class. It'd be fine. Hiding things in plain sight was the best way to hide things.

"Have a good day," he whispered because damn it that plant was his lifeline, and fuck it if anyone heard him. The books said plants responded to talking to him and that plant had gotten all the whispers of how he'd felt for an entire week. He wasn't going to stop now.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and ducked his head and hurried back towards the main building. Classes went well. His teachers seemed relieved to see him, which was shocking. He hadn't thought of himself as a good student. He didn't think his absence would have been noticed. He'd expected his friends to make fun of him for hiding for a week but instead, they fell in, crowded him like a secret service

entourage, treating him like he was made of fine china and he didn't know whether to be touched or infuriated.

Bobby was the worst. He kept foisting snacks on Johnny. In between classes he brought Johnny cookies, chips from the snack machine, sodas. He was being mothered. Bobby's eyes kept flicking to his neck and he'd look away in shame. It was mostly gone, only the ghost of Kreese left. They didn't ask why he hadn't been at school. They didn't mention Kreese or Cobra Kai. They spoke quietly like they were scared to spook him, like he'd run off at the slightest noise. He was beginning to think they were trying to lure him back into the folds of their life like a cat. Quiet little sounds, food, just hand him a blanket and a pillow and some dark place to hide and that was it. He was supposed to be a snake. He was supposed to be cunning and swift. He felt Tommy's eyes on him at lunch, searching for new bruises, fresher than the faded ones and he ducked his eyes. He reached over and stole some fries off of Tommy's plate.

"Sid didn't hit me," he said, quietly.

Not this time. Not yet. He didn't understand why they were treating him with kids' gloves. They all knew he could take a hit, heck he could take a lot of hits. They'd all hit him before. He'd hit them. This wasn't his first rodeo and it wouldn't be his last. He caught sight of Daniel sitting and talking with Ali at a table across the room. He'd healed up pretty quickly, with no dark bruises or injuries. Heck last time he'd seen Daniel he was barely limping. Today he hadn't noticed at all. Relief bloomed in his chest. They hadn't permanently damaged him. There was still hope.

After school was out he told the guys he'd see them later, a lame "I got some things to do" falling from his lips when he turned in the parking lot and headed back towards the school. He'd thought about leaving the bonsai overnight but couldn't. He needed to see it. Needed to check and make sure it was okay. Wanted to talk to it about his day as he drove around in the Avanti. He cringed inwardly. What was it, his girlfriend?

It sounded exactly like when he'd dated Ali. Rushing home to sit on the phone and talk to her about her day, about her classes, about his classes, about karate, about their lives, their dreams, hopes for the future. All that garbage that fell apart when he made one mistake that she refused to ever hear his side on. He should've told the guys that. *Don't know why you're all so damn concerned about me. I've had my heart stomped on before and I got through it. I'm used to disappointment and*

being a disappointment. I'm fine. But then he'd have to also admit that it was weird that he was sneaking back to the greenhouse to pick up his bonsai from its day at plant daycare.

It was still there, it hadn't changed or moved. Now Johnny had to wrestle with how he would take the bonsai home. How was he going to leave with his plant without someone noticing and painting a large target on himself? How would he make it look like he wasn't stealing a plant when the teacher wasn't around? He crouched down next to his tree and gently placed his hands around the pot. He was losing his mind. It was a damn tree. But it was his tree. It was a gift from the guy who'd saved his life.

The door opened and Johnny jumped up holding his bonsai awkwardly in his arms. Daniel leaned against the door.

"Seriously? What's with you and the bonsai?" Daniel asked. "You brought it to school?"

Johnny bit back his response. He couldn't just say, *I'm sorry but if I left it at home there was no guarantee it'd still be alive by the time I got back.* or *I thought you needed time LaRusso, why are you following me everywhere? Leave me and my tree alone, you stalker. Are you looking for a fight now?*

He'd have to find a new hiding spot for his bonsai he realized with a sinking feeling. This one had been perfect. Plain sight was always perfect. It's how he kept the Avanti safe. He always parked it very carefully between two of Sid's favorite cars. Sid wouldn't destroy his own cars, so he'd leave the Avanti alone. Too easy to swing too hard and accidentally ding his own car. He didn't know how to explain that caring for this plant was calming. That throwing everything into it helped ease the unending nerves. That when he had nightmares of Kreese's arm around his neck he could glance over and see the bonsai in the moonlight and remember he'd made it through and he could keep making it through.

Daniel ran a hand through his hair. "Are you like trying to make this the cool senior accessory, all seniors carry around a bonsai? Is it like what a home ec baby?"

Daniel was goading him. He could tell from his stance, the way he held his arms stiffly at his sides. It was the same cheekiness that Daniel always had when he'd run up and say something to Johnny and then hide behind a teacher so that Johnny would just stand there

furiously but unable to do anything about it. Johnny shut his eyes and breathed in the smell of dirt and the plant. He didn't need to fight Daniel. He'd promised himself he wouldn't. Even though the boy's smug face made him want to slam a fist into it. He promised his mother he'd be better. He'd promised the bonsai, Daniel's mother, Mr. Miyagi, and Daniel himself. He didn't give up on his word. It still meant something to him, even if it didn't mean anything to anyone else. He let his eyes flutter open. Daniel was still there, watching him, waiting.

"It's safer here than at home when I'm not at home," Johnny said.

He didn't know how much Daniel knew but he seemed to have known enough. Sid had laughed at dinner the night Daniel had come, talking about smart boys who knew not to hang around Johnny. It could've only been Daniel. The uncomfortable look that passed Daniel's face made him worry. What if Daniel decided that maybe it was too dangerous for the bonsai to stay with Johnny? Johnny would protect it, he'd figure it out. He felt a rush of cold. He shouldn't have admitted to the weakness. What if Mr. Miyagi wanted it back?

"Hey," Daniel said. Johnny's eyes snapped to him, he felt like he was panicking, heart racing, feeling cold all over. "Come with me," Daniel said, turning from the greenhouse and walking across the lawn. Johnny stared after him before kneeling down, carefully opening his book bag and setting the bonsai inside, making sure it was safe and secure before gently swinging it around his shoulder and hurrying out of the greenhouse and across the lawn.

Bait for a Wounded Fish

Daniel felt that rage boiling as he stalked across the lawn back towards the parking lot. Past the soccer team at practice, past the band, past the track team. He didn't check if Johnny was following him. He didn't want Johnny to see his face right now. His image and understanding of Johnny Lawrence was fraying, coming apart in his fingers every time he reached out to it to try and hold on and steady himself. It was like it'd been painted gold and it was raining and he was realizing it was fake. Everything was a mirage. He couldn't handle it.

He'd talked to Mr. Miyagi about the tree. Told him that Johnny was taking care of one of the bonsai in what he'd attempted was the nonchalant way his mother mentioned that she'd seen a coworker at the grocery store.

Mr. Miyagi had hummed his approval. "See? Boy not all bad. Not all gone."

Mr. Miyagi was right. The bonsai made Johnny human, not some monster from his nightmares. He didn't get nightmares very often. But he'd had a few over the last week. More than he'd had in years. He'd only had one bad one last semester, after Halloween where Johnny and the cobras kept chasing him and laughing. Over the last week though it was him trying to get to Johnny as Kreese tried to kill him, yelling for Mr. Miyagi but not being able to find him, so he had to do it, but he couldn't. Trying to explain to Sid that Johnny was being held underwater and he needed to get past but Sid just laughing and putting a hand on Daniel's shoulder and not listening to him, or worse one time he did listen but just glanced back and then looked at Daniel and shrugged and said "So? Why do you care?"

His mother used to say that hate and love were the same sides of a coin. It was very easy for one to flip from one side to the other. Sometimes you missed people you once didn't like.

Daniel had thought that was messed up. He'd never thought he could miss Johnny. And yet he spent a week looking for him. Worried about him. He was a mess. It was stupid. It was frustrating. He cared. He had thought he shouldn't. He'd seen the way Johnny had held onto the bonsai, the way it seemed to anchor him. He'd seen the way the cobras had surrounded Johnny. Their usual boisterous laughter was gone and quiet concern in their eyes. The way Johnny wasn't snapping

at them for the treatment. Daniel may have kicked Johnny in the face, but something had gone out. Something had broken that hadn't been broken when Johnny was giving Daniel the trophy with tears in his eyes and telling him he was all right. And Daniel was pissed about it.

His karate, the karate Mr. Miyagi had been teaching him was for defense, protecting others and himself. He couldn't let Johnny stay this way. It was against his nature. He stopped at the yellow Ford and threw his bag into the car and turned, Johnny wasn't holding the bonsai anymore but was walking towards him with his bag hung over his shoulder, thumb hooked under the strap. He was following, albeit slowly, like he was waiting for Daniel to hop in his car and peel off laughing at Johnny for thinking, thinking what? How little trust did Johnny have? To be fair Daniel didn't have a lot of trust to spare. But he was a people person. He liked talking and it usually wore people down. It wore Ali and Mr. Miyagi down. Got him those two as friends. Daniel leaned against his car and looked at Johnny.

"You want to ride with me or follow in your car?"

"I'll follow in my car," Johnny said.

No surprise there. Johnny didn't even ask where they were going. Maybe there was some trust there after all? Buried a little deep. But it was still there or else Johnny wouldn't just blindly agree to follow him. Daniel nodded and climbed into his car, waiting for Johnny. He was parked nearby. Not super close but close enough. He spotted the bonsai tucked into Johnny's backpack and watched as Johnny sunk into the Avanti. He expected Johnny to throw the bag in the back but he didn't. He carefully held the bag in his lap, long fingers unzipping the bag and pulling the bonsai out and setting it in the passenger seat, zipping the bag back up and setting it on the floor of the passenger seat.

Daniel started laughing. Johnny Lawrence treating a plant like a child. Who would've thought he'd ever see the day? Not in his wildest dreams. And his dreams had been pretty fucked up lately. Johnny looked over at him, seat belt fastened and Daniel realized he'd half expected with the level of care Johnny was giving the plant to seat belt the bonsai in as well, only to realize he was waiting for Daniel to lead the way.

Daniel led them out of the school grounds a small seed of doubt sprouting. Maybe this was a bad idea. He didn't like Johnny's red car following him. It drudged up all sorts of bad feelings. Johnny chased

Daniel for months, it was hard to let that feeling go, to calm the frantic beating of his heart. But when he looked through his rearview mirror it was just Johnny sitting in the Avanti. No cobras. Just Johnny and a little tree in the passenger seat that when they came to a stop too suddenly Johnny's hand shot out like a mother to steady the bonsai or protect it.

He laughed. The worry fading away. It'd be fine. Johnny was defanged. The snake had no bite anymore he told himself, and instead needed some care, the way you brought an injured bird to a sanctuary to heal and recuperate before releasing it back into the wild. Though something told Daniel that the cracks might be too deep, that maybe Johnny wouldn't survive being back out in the wild once free.

He pulled into the lot by Miyagi's house, parking the car next to the others, and leaned casually next to the car, bubbling with excitement. Johnny had never seen Miyagi's house. Maybe he should've told Mr. Miyagi about it first. But he wanted to embarrass the shit out of Johnny. Sit the three of them, four if you counted the bonsai, down for tea and tell Mr. Miyagi that Johnny had brought the tree to school and was treating it like a preschool child. He'd seen Johnny turn red with rage, but he wondered if he'd turn red in anger or embarrassment and if Daniel could spot the difference. He waited while Johnny parked and carefully picked up the bonsai, set it back down, unsure, taking in all the cars in the lot and then looking at Daniel, clearly lost.

"Bring the bonsai," Daniel said pushing off from his car and walking towards the house, slipping out of his shoes at the door and knocking carefully before entering.

"Mr. Miyagi, I brought a guest," he called through the house, he never knocked but with Johnny, it seemed better to do so. And he watched Johnny stiffen next to him. Daniel liked that he kept surprising Johnny, shocking him. Watching him falter brought him pleasure. It was like fighting, like sparring but gentler. There weren't any blows, no damage but more expression on his face. Different ones than the hatred and rage or the warm smirk Johnny usually had for him. Johnny was frozen half out of his shoes.

"Is this his house?" Johnny whispered, eyes a little wide in shock.

"Yeah," Daniel said easily.

Johnny looked spooked.

"He doesn't bite you know?" he said with a grin, trying to push past it, and stepping forward into the house to find Mr. Miyagi. Eventually, he found Mr. Miyagi sitting and making tea. His face lit up when he saw Daniel.

"Ah, Daniel-san. How was school?"

"Great," Daniel said warmly. "I brought Johnny with me," he said quickly, voice low.

"Oh?" Mr. Miyagi asked tilting his head, waiting.

Daniel frowned, he thought Mr. Miyagi was good with Johnny. That thing had been all patched up on their end. But it was weird wasn't it? Bringing Johnny here. Daniel took a deep breath the way Mr. Miyagi taught him.

"I think he needs to be here," he managed after a moment.

It was vague, strange. He didn't know how to explain it quickly with Johnny presumably frozen half in and half out of his shoes at the front of the house. Daniel was willing to share Mr. Miyagi if maybe it'd bring some more life into that pale skin of Johnny's. If maybe he'd stop curling his shoulders over the bonsai plant as if trying to shield it with his whole body.

Mr. Miyagi nodded like he understood without Daniel needing to explain. It was why Daniel loved Mr. Miyagi. They just got each other. He'd listen when Daniel needed to talk but he also picked up on the things Daniel couldn't bring himself to say. He smiled brightly. Mr. Miyagi stood.

"Bring to back," Mr. Miyagi said.

Daniel nodded hurrying back to where Johnny was looking out at his car like he was trying to decide whether he should run away. Daniel grabbed his arm, half expecting to be thrown, to find himself sailing through the air. But Johnny flinched instead. Daniel had never seen Johnny flinch and he quickly pulled his hand away.

"Come around back," Daniel said, slipping back into his shoes and hopping off the porch and into the dirt to walk around.

Johnny slipped his one foot that had come out of his shoe back in and followed. Daniel started walking backward, he wanted to see Johnny's face when he pushed the gate open. Wanted to see if he had the same

look of awe that Daniel had had. He stumbled, his feet went out from under him as his shoe hit a root, something he wasn't expecting. He watched Johnny shift the bonsai in his arms, his other hand reaching out and grabbing Daniel before he fell, moving quickly to scoop his newly free arm behind Daniel's back. In all their fighting Daniel knew Johnny was sturdy, knew he was muscular and fast, but being, even momentarily in his arms was a different feeling altogether and he didn't know what to do with this information. He felt safe, secure, his hands had gone up to reach for Johnny as he felt and now were over Johnny's chest, fingers gripping onto his shirt for security, and damn that muscle while Johnny was flexed was impressive.

"You okay?" Johnny asked.

There was concern there, worry. He hadn't moved, was carefully holding Daniel and the bonsai, and didn't even seem to be straining despite supporting most of Daniel's weight. Daniel tightened his grip on the soft cotton of Johnny's shirt using it carefully to pull himself up till he was standing again, too close. Daniel was a little surprised, the pounding of blood rushing through his veins, his mouth dry. He would've thought he would've panicked to be so close to Johnny, to see those muscles in action again, even if minutely so. He had been preparing himself for the possibility of sparring. He wondered if this was why Ali had dated him. The safe feeling of being caught from falling. He was sure his face was red, but grateful that it could be construed as embarrassment.

"Yeah," Daniel said a soft laugh. "I'm fine. Probably should be watching where I'm going."

Those blue eyes sure were intense up close. His hands were still on Johnny's chest, the arm still out just in case. *Step away Daniel.* He told himself. *This isn't some petting zoo, back away from the boy before you do something even stupider.* It was harder to do than his brain commanded. There were too many things he wanted to do and he felt his ears burn. It was unexpected like a floodgate had opened. He stepped back, carefully pulling himself away from Johnny's arm.

He'd half expected Johnny to roll his eyes, to call him an idiot. And it was there, in his eyes, a glittering of amusement but he was still biting his tongue. If it was Daniel he would've been bleeding by now. He couldn't stop himself most of the time. Maybe Johnny was better trained on most things than Daniel even expected. Daniel hurried to the gate and rushed through, holding it open for Johnny. This was safer, to watch while not moving as Johnny stepped through the gate,

shifting his bonsai in his arms and looking around.

It was worth it. Johnny couldn't hide when he stepped through the gate. Mr. Miyagi was standing on the porch, hands watching as well. Johnny took in the bonsai's, the green grass, the wooden walking paths. Daniel wished he had a camera. Johnny was taking it all in like he was trying to memorize everything. Like he couldn't believe he was there. He turned to take in the house and his eyes fell to Mr. Miyagi.

"It's beautiful sir," Johnny said.

There was no joking in his tone, pure awe. Something warm filled Daniels's chest. Misgivings fading away. This had been the right choice. There was no way a boy who looked at Mr. Miyagi's garden like that, who held that damn bonsai like a security blanket would destroy the space.

"Always lots to do," Mr. Miyagi said walking forward.

It was bait. Daniel knew it was bait. Mr. Miyagi was an expert fisherman and knew the right type of lure to reel anything in.

Johnny shifted on his feet, pulling his gaze away from the garden, and looked at Mr. Miyagi. "If you need any help sir, I could, if you want-"

Johnny was struggling. Daniel felt the blue eyes slip to him, he didn't feel welcome yet. He was offering free labor and yet didn't feel welcome even to take that scrap. Something Mr. Miyagi had him doing right off the bat. He clearly wanted to be here so badly. What did you do if the fish just jumped straight into your hands but then seemed too wounded to even flop around? Daniel shut the gate and hurried towards the spot where Mr. Miyagi usually worked in the back yard and then saw Johnny still stuck and went back and pulled him along, going for the edge of his shirt. The fact Johnny let him touch him, or rather his shirt, let him just pull him or push him around like he was clay ready to be molded was going to go to his head if he wasn't careful. If there weren't boundaries Daniel would start overstepping them and end up all tangled up before he knew it.

"Mr. Miyagi always has stuff he needs help with," he said with a laugh. "I'm sure he'd appreciate the help."

Johnny nodded following along to where Mr. Miyagi sat with some tea, pouring it into cups for the boys. Watching them curiously but saying nothing.

"Mr. Miyagi guess what?" Daniel said, that desire to see how far he could push it bubbling up. Maybe it was mean. But it was what had kept him going.

"What Daniel-san?" Mr. Miyagi asked as Johnny carefully set the bonsai next to him and took the cup of tea to breathe in the smell.

"Johnny brought the bonsai to school," Daniel said, a Cheshire grin spreading across his face. Only the tips of Johnny's ears were pink. He'd shut his eyes and took a sip of the tea.

"Ah," Mr. Miyagi said thoughtfully looking at the bonsai.

He didn't look like he found amusement in this fact. Instead, there seemed to be a moment of concern. Daniel hadn't mentioned Sid but Mr. Miyagi was smart. He always knew more than he let on.

"I-" Johnny started and stopped, worrying the edge of his cup, and then seemed to steady something within himself. His shoulders which had been curving in straightened and he held his head tall and looked at Mr. Miyagi. "I promise I will take good care of it, sir. Thank you for the bonsai."

Mr. Miyagi blinked and raised his hand to wave away Johnny's words. "Miyagi know."

Johnny blinked, it was there only a moment, a glassiness of tears and emotion that were quickly reigned back in but Daniel caught it. He shifted in his seat to sit on his hands. If he wasn't careful he was going to hug Johnny Lawrence and then where would they be? It was like, he realized, he'd brought a big dog into Mr. Miyagi's yard and was wanting to keep it. A dog he'd seen kicked too many times or heard of being kicked. He wanted to give it a bath and oh shit that was not where he wanted his brain to go. *Come on Daniel Get a grip.* he told himself.

Mr. Miyagi glanced out over the yard. "In your karate, did you do kata?"

Daniel stiffened at this. He wasn't expecting Mr. Miyagi to start on with the karate. He hadn't meant to open that door. He'd just meant to bring some calm into Johnny's life. Calm that the backyard at Mr. Miyagi's gave him. He wasn't ready to share his karate. Maybe he was selfish. But he had to do chores for months before Mr. Miyagi showed him the point of what he was doing. He'd worked himself to the bone for the pleasure.

"No," Johnny said.

Mr. Miyagi nodded thoughtfully. He looked around like he was trying to find chores to do. Like he hadn't given all his chores to Daniel. Trying to think of something to spin into a lesson. Mr. Miyagi had seen Johnny in action but neither he nor Daniel really knew where Johnny was and how that offensive karate meshed with Mr. Miyagi's defensive karate. Daniel had to admit despite himself, despite that flare of jealousy, he wanted to see it. He wanted to see Johnny working himself to the bone for Mr. Miyagi, scrubbing floors while Mr. Miyagi walked away reminding him to breathe while he did so. He needed someone else to go through what he'd gone through.

"This weekend, if wish to help," Mr. Miyagi said. "Come here, six o'clock."

"Yes sir," Johnny said.

He held himself like what Daniel expected a soldier to, spoke like one too. He was too well trained, too coiled up and twisted into the version Kreese made, Daniel wanted to dig his fingers into Johnny's shoulder and move him, to adjust the stance and make him different but the same.

They fell into silence, it felt companionable, the two of them sitting out looking at the yard, birds hopping around pecking at the grass as they drank their tea. Daniel couldn't help himself. Started rambling. About classes. About the projects, he was working on in his classes. It was strange. Looking from the outside it seemed like they weren't listening. But Daniel knew Mr. Miyagi listened when he rambled like he was trying to parse through it to figure out whether Daniel was okay or not, whether the day had been good or bad, whether he'd gotten into fights or not. But Johnny, Johnny had his head cocked to the side. He'd seen that when Johnny was listening to his friends but staring out over the cafeteria. Listening but being aware. He'd never used that around Daniel and Daniel couldn't stop. He followed the train of thought from school to his cousin in New Jersey and found himself spinning right back to California, slipping into a discussion about cars, about the Ford, about his mother's car.

He wanted to stop talking. But he couldn't. He started talking about his mother's job, how it was going, about their little apartment and the strange sound the pipes made sometimes, and how his mother had promised him a pool the entire ride to California, and the pool wasn't full, ever. He'd been in California for months, full semester and hadn't

seen a pool outside of the Golf 'N Stuff and how Ali kept saying they would ride the big slide and yet never had and this time of year in New Jersey it was cold but here it was warm so like you could still go swimming but he hadn't gone swimming, not really the entire time he was in California and what even was the point of being in California if you didn't get to swim?

He paused. He'd talked about Ali in front of Johnny and had expected something to explode in him, there was just a twitch of his jaw, but nothing else. He was dying to ask, and that's why he'd spiraled. He wanted to know how long they'd dated, why he'd not shown up at Ali's birthday party and left her waiting and concerned for hours. He wanted to get Johnny to open up. He needed to see how much gunk had been poured in by Kreese and Sid and what was salvageable. What he and Mr. Miyagi could fix. Because that was it now. Like a stray Johnny was warming up a spot in Daniel's life faster than he'd expected. It tumbled out before he could stop it. He'd been so good. He'd tried so hard to veer straight out of the question. It was humiliating's to ask in front of Mr. Miyagi.

"Why did Ali break up with you?"

There was a good chance he was going to get hit. That he'd just collapsed this house of cards he'd worked on. They weren't friends yet. They weren't anything. But it was eating him up. He wanted to know. Because he liked Ali, but the Ali that fought Johnny, punched him after he kissed her, the Ali who egged Daniel on in his rivalry for revenge against Johnny didn't match up with the Ali who'd been concerned he'd been missing over a week. The Johnny that she'd dated for who knows how long and said he was reliable and she could set her to watch to him. That said she jumped ship before he spiraled out of control. The silence in the garden was deafening and Daniel thought maybe he should run. Get a head start.

A Happy Place to Escape to

Chapter Notes

Moved something Daniel did in KK2 up a bit to here.

No one had ever asked Johnny why. No one usually asked Johnny a question and expected a real thought-out answer. Except for teachers or his mother. Sid's questions, Kreese's questions, were always rhetorical and dark. Always less of a question and more of a fact. When Ali broke up with Johnny Sid just laughed a cold mirthless laugh. Of course, she broke up with him. *She was too good for him. What was he if he couldn't keep a girl? Maybe he should try a boy next and see if that was more his speed.* It was meant as a joke, a mean joke, but Johnny felt stricken. He'd tried to hide that that was an option he'd been thinking of. His mother knew and she just gave him a look of *you're still safe*, but he remembered the way his heart had thrown itself against his rib cages and the cold sweat on his skin ready to grab his go bag and run.

He remembered Kreese asking where his girl had gone. Ali used to come by sometimes to meet him at the dojo. Dutch had unhelpfully supplied an answer that wasn't any of Kreese's business now that he thought about it. That with a laugh Ali had dumped him and hooked up with some transfer student from New Jersey with a big mouth. Kreese recommended revenge, to put the boy in his place, and all the students had agreed. They'd all agreed because they just did with Kreese. Who took their bursts of anger and fed the flames until Johnny found himself all riled up and not remembering what had set it off. Just Kreese's whispers that LaRusso was probably making fun of him with Ali wherever he was and you have to strike first and show no mercy. And he did. Maybe their laughter wasn't always at him, but it felt like it. Felt like they were making fun of Johnny behind his back. But LaRusso was full of jokes, he'd seen it in class. He was a class clown when he wanted to be. And now in retrospect, there was a good chance he was just making Ali laugh, not at Johnny but in general. And maybe Johnny was a little jealous. He didn't have much to laugh about.

He hesitated.

"Daniel-san, no need to stick fingers in healing wound," Mr. Miyagi said, admonishing the boy.

"I don't know," Johnny said, the words bubbling up. "I missed her birthday, was all she told me. She broke up with me over the house messaging machine. Sid got a kick out of that. Played it over and over and over. She sounded pissed. Er, sorry sir," Johnny directed at Mr. Miyagi. "She was angry. I missed her birthday because," Johnny paused looking at his cup of tea. "The short version of it is that I was out drinking with my friends. We have fake IDs. Got absolutely trashed. The long story though is Sid's dad died. It was like...like a grenade went off at the house. It was sudden and shocking and everything was a mess. I didn't tell the guys what had happened just that I needed to make myself scarce for a while. So they took me drinking. I drank more than I should've. I remembered it too late, tried to get to the phone but there was this girl sobbing into it all night. When she finally stopped sobbing into it she smashed the damn thing. Sorry, sir. I couldn't get ahold of Ali to tell her what happened. I was in no state to drive. I had no way to contact anyone to get over there. And I didn't want Mr. and Mrs. Mills to see me like that, y'know? They only liked me because of Sid's money. If they'd seen me they wouldn't have let me through the door anyway," he sighed. "Even if I hadn't been drunk."

"Why didn't you tell her?" Daniel asked.

Johnny looked up at him pointedly. "I tried."

"Oh, right," Daniel said deflating into his seat.

"I-" Johnny took a deep breath, eyes falling back down to his tea. Mr. Miyagi had poured him more. "Maybe it was for the best you know? Like in her message she already sounded like she'd already made her mind up long before and the birthday thing was just the match to set the whole thing up in flames. I think she was already halfway out the door and didn't want to tell me, didn't want to...explain what I'd done wrong, or let me try to fix it."

He lifted the tea to take a sip. It was hard to control his emotions when talking about Ali. He thought he loved her. Thought maybe she saw something in him that no one else did. Something good and worthwhile. And he wanted that to be true. He'd clung to that so desperately that he worried he smothered it. Daniel was watching him, it almost looked like pity was on his face. Pity and confusion.

"Shortest version," Johnny said remembering Mr. Miyagi's saying in his shop. "I kept her waiting."

"But you didn't mean to!" Daniel said. It escaped his lips like an explosion. Johnny was startled and looked over at him. The pity and confusion were replaced by anger.

"She's your girlfriend now," Johnny said gently. As much as he'd tried to drive a wedge between the two of them before, he hadn't ever wanted Ali to get hurt. "She's a nice girl. Take good care of her for me, will ya?" Johnny asked lifting his teacup in a cheer and tipping back the last in his cup. Johnny thought that was cool. Johnny thought that would calm him down but Daniel still looked pissed.

"Daniel-san, breathe," Mr. Miyagi said calmly from Daniel's side.

"But Mr. Miyagi. I met Johnny's stepfather. He's.. he's almost as bad as Kreese, maybe worse. And if Johnny had to flee the house because he blew up, it's not fair she broke up with him."

"Daniel-san," Mr. Miyagi said, patting Daniel's shoulder. "Breathe in," Mr. Miyagi said clasping his hands together, "through nose" he said and then moved his hands out in front of him "Breathe out through mouth." He pulled his hands back to his chest, "Breathe in" and then his hands went up, "Breathe out. Now again. Breathe Daniel-san. Close eyes." Mr. Miyagi opened his eyes and nodded in approval, coaching Daniel into breathing. Johnny wondered what his life would've been like if someone had stopped him every time he nearly flew off the handle to just breathe and take a moment. The person would have their hands full he thought with a small smile. The tension in Daniel evaporated and he blinked his eyes open.

"Better?" Mr. Miyagi asked.

Daniel nodded. "I mean I feel better, but I also don't feel better," he said softly.

Johnny wanted to say that was life but he bit it back, instead, he said, "It's fine, LaRusso. Ali didn't want to know and I've learned my lesson from trying to make her," he said rubbing his jaw. "She's got a mean hook and honestly it's not her business anymore. Would I like to know why exactly that tipped everything over the edge, yeah, but I'm not really losing sleep over it anymore."

It was true. He wasn't. He was losing sleep over other things instead. Fingers digging into his neck, vases thrown at him, running and never escaping fast enough before the doors locked him in. The bonsai helped. With any luck, it'd be around longer than him and that gave him some comfort. He'd read that trees could live over a hundred

years, even the bonsai ones. And he liked that. Damn, he was relying on a tree too much.

It was so peaceful in the backyard at Mr. Miyagi's place. Johnny's eyes ran over the yard. It was the perfect place for just about anything. Karate lessons, working away on projects, having a cup of tea. Everything was lovingly well maintained. Johnny wanted to memorize every blade of grass.

When he'd started learning karate he'd checked out books about it at the library, which led to books about meditation which Kreese had told him was pansy-ass bullshit. But he remembered that a key to it was to create a happy place in your mind. A place you could escape to when things got difficult. Johnny didn't have that place, he'd never thought of one, just dipping into music and focusing on the sound instead of reality. But this place, this was it. Johnny felt like for the rest of his life, even if he wasn't allowed back ever again, this would be his happy place. Sitting and drinking tea with Mr. Miyagi and Daniel blabbering on about nothing important in this backyard. And maybe, with that, he'd get through the rest of the year. And then who knows what. Maybe like Sid said, he'd die in a ditch somewhere, or maybe he'd get to do something cool. What that was he didn't know. He didn't know anything about his future. He didn't have any plans or dreams. Not anymore.

He could feel Daniel's eyes on him again. He wondered if he was looking for cracks, seams to stick his fingers in like Mr. Miyagi had said, wounds to dig around in. Johnny had plenty. He usually snapped when someone prodded one of them. But Johnny was so tired. He was exhausted. It felt like he'd been holding up the sky, Atlas, he remembered. He felt like Atlas. A hand found its way to his shoulder. Daniel kept touching him. He tried not to flinch, watched it coming tensely. It wasn't awful. It didn't burn. He didn't dig his fingers in or his nails like Sid did during fancy dinners.

He had expected Daniel to be over the moon when Johnny's world came crashing around him, as he peeked around at the shambles that was Johnny's life, the one he hid. His hand was a solid weight, comforting and warm. He kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. For Mr. Miyagi to change his mind about Johnny coming by over the weekend. About Daniel feeling comfortable with him being there at all. He'd expected a lot of things and kept waiting for them. But it didn't happen. The evening wore on and Mr. Miyagi invited them for dinner. Johnny protested that he didn't want to intrude, but Daniel was pulling him up and into the house. Talking a mile a minute about

Mr. Miyagi's cooking and all the food he made and how delicious it was and how Johnny couldn't leave yet. They took their shoes off at the door and Johnny felt too big and clumsy for the space all of a sudden. There were breakables everywhere. He spotted a framed medal of valor on a shelf and Daniel caught his gaze and started a new spiel.

"That's Mr. Miyagi's. He fought in World War 2. I made that frame. Do you like it? Thought it'd make it pop. It was just sitting in a box Mr. Miyagi showed me. You got to show that kind of stuff off you know? Like trophies or certificates and awards or family photos. I'm working on making frames for his other stuff, but he's a bit stubborn. Says he doesn't want me making a fuss. But it's a big deal, right? He's a hero."

Daniel was beaming with pride for his sensei. Kreese had also been in war. Both veterans but in vastly different ways. Kreese talked about it a lot. Mostly to tell them of the horrors of it. Prepping his students for the war against life. Which when everything was awful, hit home. Everything snaked in and made itself at home, all the toxic garbage, and Johnny had a feeling he'd be sifting through the wreckage for years.

"It's nice," Johnny said when Daniel handed him the frame to inspect.

He probably made it in shop class. It wasn't a class they took together, but Johnny knew Daniel was in it. Daniel grinned brightly at the praise even though it wasn't much and Johnny's heart fluttered. He wondered if he was sick. What did a heart attack feel like again? What were the warning signs? He was too young for heart attacks, right? If there was anyone with awful luck enough to die from a heart attack in high school it was Johnny. Daniel was talking now about Okinawa, a place where Mr. Miyagi was from, and the few smatterings of facts he knew. Something smelled good. Daniel was standing close, showing him pictures of Mr. Miyagi in uniform and his hand was on Johnny's bicep, he was leaning close, talking softly.

"It wasn't a good time for him, so don't mention it. They put his family in a concentration camp while he was out fighting," Daniel said quietly.

"That's fucked up," Johnny said, eyes wide.

Daniel nodded. "They died. His wife and son."

Johnny glanced through the house. He could hear Mr. Miyagi singing as he cooked.

"Fuck," Johnny breathed.

He didn't know why Daniel was telling him this. Why he was standing so close that Johnny could feel his breath. Why he'd even been invited in the first place. He thought Daniel wanted to be left alone, avoided, yet here he was hand on his arm whispering to him in the dim-lit room.

"Were you holding all your curses in?" Daniel asked, his voice was full of mirth, he was teasing Johnny realized. Making fun of him but in a gentle way. Playful. "Got any more you need to knock loose before we join Mr. Miyagi?"

"No," Johnny said as Daniel put everything back and then made a move towards the kitchen, gently pulling Johnny along by his sleeve.

Dinner was warm and comforting. Different than the dinners Johnny had at the country club or at the house with Sid's guests, different from the dinners he had with his mother. Mr. Miyagi had made fish, rice, and soup.

"Simple, but hearty," Mr. Miyagi said with a smile filling the boy's bowls.

Johnny watched Daniel pick up a pair of chopsticks and set about eating with ease. Johnny picked up a pair and stared at them, watching the other two eat. He could sit at any fancy restaurant and not worry about which fork to use first. His table manners were impeccable. But chopsticks weren't something he'd used before. He watched Mr. Miyagi deftly start using his chopsticks to slice the fish into sections and then found Daniel looking at him. Daniel held up his hand, the chopsticks posed between fingers, and then slowly moved them together. Johnny followed suit, glancing from his hands to Daniel's until it matched and followed his movements as he cut up the fish on his plate as well. It wasn't easy. It used a completely different set of movements than what he was used to. But it was satisfying when it worked out, even though it was clumsy. Everything he ate was new to him. He'd had rice and fish and soup of course, but not with these flavors or combinations.

"It's delicious sir," Johnny said.

"Johnny-san," Mr. Miyagi said looking up at him. "Mr. Miyagi, Miyagi-san, okay? No sir."

Johnny blushed lightly. He was so used to sir. Kreese was always "yes

sir. Yes sensei." heels together, back straight, arms behind back, almost like a soldier. It was a habit. Sid was also, sir. "Uh, yes, sir-er Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said.

Mr. Miyagi smiled, "Glad you like. Caught myself."

"Mr. Miyagi likes to fish. Whole family is fishermen," Daniel explained around a mouthful of rice.

Mr. Miyagi nodded proudly. "Do you like fishing Johnny-san?"

"I've never done it," Johnny said.

Mr. Miyagi hummed thoughtfully. "Very peaceful," he said.

"Also very boring," Daniel whispered to him when Mr. Miyagi got up to get more rice.

While Johnny focused on maneuvering his chopsticks, proud with every successful bite, Daniel took over the conversation. Filling the quiet space around them with warm talk of the last time he'd gone fishing with his uncle. The type of fish he'd caught, how they spent most of the day out in the sun and caught almost nothing, so the few fish they caught were big deals. Only the fish his cousin caught was tiny and the fish Daniel caught slipped away. Which was fine because they had to let them go anyway. They didn't catch anything they could keep. Which led to more talk about New Jersey, his accent becoming thicker as he spoke of the foods they ate. A couple of Italian seafood recipes that he'd have to try some time now that he was on the coast.

He spoke animatedly, talking with his free hand as he ate. It was atrocious table manners, Sid would've slapped Johnny for even attempting it. But somehow it fit with the atmosphere. Johnny wondered how Daniel never seemed to run out of things to talk about. Johnny felt like the few wells of interesting topics he usually went to had dried up. He had nothing interesting to say. Daniel made it look easy.

Mr. Miyagi got up when they finished and brought out a bowl of fruit, taking a knife and carefully cutting up apples and peeling small oranges passing the sliced apples to Johnny and Daniel. Johnny hadn't had anyone slice an apple for him in, he didn't remember how long. He tried to remember if his mother did it. It would've had to have been before Sid, when he'd been really little. Probably to cut out bruises or soft spots. The apple was perfectly sweet and crisp and the

little orange, "tangerine", Daniel explained in a side step of his running dialog as Johnny picked it up and studied it, was juicy with a bit of tartness. The slices were so small and perfect. It matched the dinner well. A perfect opposite. Savory and then sweet. Not greasy as the burgers Johnny sometimes got when he didn't want to eat at home, when he was avoiding being at home and when he ate in the Avanti in a dark parking lot somewhere. Or as heavy as the steaks that practically still bled that Sid liked for dinner, with potatoes drowning in butter.

Before he knew it it was time to go home. Johnny didn't want to leave. But he had no reason to stay. He carried his bonsai out to the car, thanked Mr. Miyagi again, and wishing him a good evening. Daniel was talking quickly to the man on the steps while Johnny put the bonsai in the passenger seat of the Avanti and breathed in the cool night air. There was a crunch of dirt and gravel and footsteps hurrying towards him. He turned.

"Six o'clock on Saturday, remember?" Daniel asked.

"Yes," Johnny said.

"Will you be able to find your way home okay? Find your way back here on Saturday?" Daniel asked.

"Yes. Don't worry about me," Johnny said. He'd meant this as a polite thing, that he was capable. But Daniel frowned. Johnny tried to give a reassuring smile, but it felt wrong. It was harder to smile now.

"Get home safe Johnny," Daniel said, before heading over to his yellow Ford. "See you at school."

Johnny nodded and slipped into the Avanti and slowly drove home.

Ready to Fight

Chapter Notes

> I honestly don't know what the inside of Miyagi's truck looks like very well so I took some liberties, went with a tall stick shift control if that makes sense.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daniel strolled into Mr. Miyagi's house on Saturday at 7am. He wanted to see what Mr. Miyagi had put Johnny to work on. Waxing the cars? Sanding the floors? Washing windows? How many chores could Johnny boy handle before he got frustrated? Daniel thought it was around painting the whole fence on both sides that sent him grumbling. He looked around. Mr. Miyagi tended to disappear once Daniel got to work on a project, so of course, he'd made himself scarce once Johnny had started as well. He wasn't by the cars, so Daniel headed to the back, he wasn't panting the fence or sanding the wood. He put his hands on his hips, where the hell was he? He walked out on the boards and turned back to look at the house. Did Johnny not show? Did Mr. Miyagi take him somewhere else? He'd seen the red Avanti in the lot, so Johnny was here and there was his bonsai carefully nestled in the garden somewhere where it could get sun.

Daniel held a hand over his eyes and searched. How could one not be able to find a tall muscular blonde? It wasn't like he was Waldo. He couldn't hide easily. He spotted a ladder and followed it up. Johnny was on the roof, his shirt was folded up to the side and he was working in the early morning sun in a tank top that showed off his muscles and clung to his chest. Daniel felt his mouth grow dry. Damn. Johnny hadn't noticed him yet so he continued to stare. Johnny was focused, he was holding nails between his lips, moving methodically across the roof, removing old pieces of roofing and replacing it with new.

Daniel remembered Mr. Miyagi murmuring about how he needed to fix the roof. Daniel had asked him not to do it himself. Was too scared Mr. Miyagi would fall and break something, even though he was pretty sure on Halloween Mr. Miyagi had jumped a fence to save him. Roofing though was different, more dangerous. But Johnny was making it look easy. He'd figured out the rhythm, and he was moving. His jean shorts looked tight from this angle, hugging all the right places. Daniel felt his face flush. Okay, maybe too much staring.

Johnny shifted to the other side, settling down to start on a new section. The sun hit his hair just right to make it look golden. He looked like he stepped out of a magazine, or one of those calendars the local fire department sold every year in Newark. The one his mother's friend bought and hung up with a laugh saying it was for a good cause, the one Daniel had sneaked peeks at checking out all the months and flushing red with each turned page.

It took more effort than Daniel wanted to admit to pull his eyes off of Johnny and keep them off. He looked at a cloud and then his eyes were drawn back, watching the muscles of Johnny's arms work, as his fingers brushed his lips, distracted as he tried to find one of the nails between them, as he brushed a bit of sweat from his brow onto the back of his hand.

He forced his eyes down, past the roof and at the dark house. Where was Mr. Miyagi? He needed to find the man. He needed to be saved from himself before he did something stupid like call out to Johnny. With Daniel's luck, he'd tell him he looked like a guy who belonged on a calendar. And if anything Daniel ever said warranted a black eye, that did. There was no way Johnny would take that as a compliment and the unsteady shift of their relationship would surely crumble. Daniel wasn't ready for that. He'd already promised himself he'd help get Johnny back up on his feet. Get a warm smile on the boy's face.

And first, he needed to stop ogling. The boy sure did glisten in the morning sun. Since when were tank tops practically obscene? *Stop Daniel. Look away. What is wrong with you? Find Mr. Miyagi. If you say anything to Johnny there's a good chance he'll fall off the roof, and then where would you be? Taking care of him? Nursing him back to health? That's a stupid idea. Mr. Miyagi. Find Mr. Miyagi. One step in front of the other. Good.*

Mr. Miyagi was in his house, reading the paper with his glasses low on his nose.

"See Johny-san?" Mr. Miyagi asked.

"Yes," Daniel said. It came out squeakier than he meant. His skin still felt warm.

"Fixing roof. Then we go to beach. Work on balance more."

Daniel frowned. Working on balance more meant trying to stand in the ocean while the waves crashed down on him. He hated it. He was pretty sure Mr. Miyagi just delighted in watching him fall over. The

only plus was that most likely Johnny would also fall over and collapse in the waters drinking a mouthful of saltwater. That would be fun to see. Though now he was thinking of roof Johnny, flicking water out of his hair in the sparkling ocean waves, tank top practically see-through and clinging, and he really did need to get a grip.

He sat in the house drinking tea and listening to the quiet hammering Johnny was doing, while Mr. Miyagi read the paper. He ate some of the snacks Mr. Miyagi had and then after a while the hammering stopped. Mr. Miyagi folded his paper and headed outside. To be honest with himself it was nice to be on this side of the chores. Watching Mr. Miyagi go outside and hmm over the work done, compliment, and then find something else that needed to be done. In this case, it was all done. It seemed Daniel had missed that step, the other drop of the shoe that oh, there was more that needed work. Something he'd missed. He watched Johnny come down carefully off the ladder and put it away as Mr. Miyagi came back in. Soon Johnny came as well. He'd dried off with a towel that hung around his neck. His gaze met Daniels.

"Hi," Daniel said, trying to be as nonchalant as possible.

"Hey," Johnny said, taking the glass of water from Mr. Miyagi who looked between the two of them for a moment.

"Let's go," Mr. Miyagi said and heading to the truck.

Daniel didn't know why he'd expected them to take his Ford. It just made more sense to him, there was a back seat. Or the Avanti which *also had a back seat.* But before he knew it he was standing outside the truck with Johnny while Mr. Miyagi waited with the passenger door open. It was a squeeze with Mr. Miyagi handing the keys over to Daniel and with Johnny sitting in the middle between them. Johnny stared out at the Avanti in the lot like he too was wondering why they were all crammed into the truck but he didn't ask the question. *Chicken.* So Daniel would have to do it.

"Mr. Miyagi, wouldn't you be more comfortable in the Ford? If all three of us are going together shouldn't we-"

Mr. Miyagi shook his head. "Truck is better."

Daniel wasn't so sure about that but stuck the keys in the ignition. Johnny probably was regretting his decision to come by Mr. Miyagi's, crammed between the two of them like they were scared he was going to run. He wasn't even sure Mr. Miyagi had said why they were going

to the beach to Johnny. Yet Mr. Miyagi said go and he went. Daniel didn't know whether it was sweet or some of that unquestioning obedience leftover from Kreese.

Daniel could feel Johnny's bare warm arm against his arm, his thigh against Daniel's. Daniel reached over for the stick shift and realized just how awkward this drive was going to be. Johnny had long legs and was as pressed against the seat as far as he could go but there was no escape from the fact the stick shift was between his legs. Daniel could still maneuver it, it just meant his forearm would brush against Johnny's thigh, a lot, on the drive to the beach.

He snuck a quick glance at Johnny through the mirror. He was tomato red. It wasn't the red of anger, but embarrassment. Daniel moved it, arm brushing the warm skin, his heart pounding in his ears, they moved forward. This was going to be a long ride and torture. Johnny couldn't retaliate without them possibly dying. He was trapped. If this pissed him off they were screwed.

Because of the shorts, he kept brushing skin every time he had to reach over and Johnny was tense at his side. Stiff as a board, leg muscles taut. Daniel wanted to laugh. Only he would ever find himself in this situation where he had to keep reaching between Johnny's legs for a purely non-sexual reason. It was absolutely ridiculous. Like he was trying to steal cheese off of a set mousetrap. It was too much. He was going to die. They'd get to the beach and Johnny would murder him as soon as Mr. Miyagi's back was turned.

It wasn't until after he parked, his fingers brushing against Johnny's thigh one last time, and he hopped out of the truck that he realized how tense he'd been, how he'd been holding his breath. He kept expecting it to be too much for Johnny, too much indignation would just explode like a shaken soda bottle. Too much of being close to Daniel, the unmanliness of the situation, but Johnny didn't snap. He didn't explode. They'd made it safely to the beach and Johnny quickly escaped the car as soon as space freed up. He didn't grab Daniel's shirt full of anger or rage, like he'd expected. Just stood, face pink, waiting to hear what Mr. Miyagi had to say.

Mr. Miyagi explained the exercise, standing in the water, trying to stay up, how it was good balance and great for a hot day, and then he walked around to the back of the truck and grabbed a tackle box and fishing rod. *Oh, so that's why we took the truck. Of course. He wanted to go fishing.* Daniel wanted to tell Johnny, explain again Mr. Miyagi's love for fishing was why he'd suffered the ride over, but Johnny was

gone, had taken off towards the water, shoes discarded along the way. It felt like a challenge. Like the ready set, go had been shouted and Daniel had been distracted and hadn't noticed. He raced after Johnny, hopping out of his shoes and tossing them next to Johnny's before hurrying into the cool waves.

The shock of the water sent all the warmth from his skin packing. The flush he was sure that probably wasn't noticeable retreated and he found himself hopping after Johnny, struggling as waves crashed against his legs. Johnny was turning to face him and a wave rocked against him and he stayed standing. *Unfair*. Daniel thought. The first time he'd come the waves had knocked him on his ass before he'd even found a spot to try and root himself. But this time Daniel would show off. He'd show Johnny how good he was. It'd be like a mechanical bull, both of them would be thrown off eventually, but Daniel would make sure it'd be Johnny first. Show him what studying under Mr. Miyagi was like. A sort of laugh bubbled in his throat, excited to watch Johnny face plant into the ocean and come up sputtering but determined to do better next time, the way Daniel had. Daniel turned his back to the water and stood next to Johnny.

He searched the beach and spotted Mr. Miyagi setting up a ways away with his hat on, casting off with an air of pure calm. Daniel turned his gaze back forward as the waves crashed against him. The ebb and flow. Johnny was standing tall and it was like he was on land. The waves weren't moving him. Was it because he was taller? Because he had more muscles? Daniel didn't know what it was but it was pissing him off. He was struggling to keep a look of calm on his own face, struggling to remember to just breathe and not grit his teeth and dig his toes in the slippery wet sand as waves tried to knock him over.

Mr. Miyagi's karate was focused on balance and defense, whatever Cobra Kai taught Johnny shouldn't have been applicable. This was something Daniel was supposed to be better at than Johnny, but of course, tall beautiful blonde Johnny wasn't even wobbling. Daniel wondered if it'd be unsportsmanlike to try and spar with Johnny in the ocean. If he could knock Johnny's legs out from under him and pretend that he hadn't done anything. It was like spending all your allowance trying to dunk someone at the carnival dunk tank and striking out. Daniel had been looking forward to this since Mr. Miyagi had first hinted at it. This was his dojo, his chance to be intimidating and the better student. It was where Daniel was supposed to stand out and shine in the spotlight.

But Johnny was standing effortlessly in the water and Daniel stumbled

with that last wave. He cursed quietly and tried to focus on his breathing, he was getting too riled up by how Johnny looked, how smug he seemed. It was for sure a challenge, a little battle, and Daniel went under. He came up pissed because Johnny was helping him up and of course Johnny was laughing at him, he was always laughing at Daniel. Nothing Daniel did was right. He picked the wrong girl to flirt with on the beach, he picked the wrong dojo to check out, went to the wrong school, and was always put in Johnny's crosshairs against his own wishes. He pushed Johnny away storming the beach, blood boiling. Johnny made his life miserable and couldn't even have the decency to fall over. He "had to be so damn perfect all the time," and oh shit he was talking aloud.

"LaRusso," Johnny said quietly, following after Daniel.

Daniel whirled pushing him hard, his foot slipping in the sand, and they landed together on the beach, the waves only sliding up to Johnny's waist.

"What the hell?" Daniel said, pushing himself up. "If you're so damn smug then what's your problem? Are you just holding it all in? Are we going to fight? I'm tired of you making fun of me. I'm tired of that look on your face, always laughing at me." His hand was on Johnny's wet tank top, twisting it in his hand, sitting on him while Johnny lay on the sand looking up at him.

Johnny's face was infuriatingly calm. That damn mask. He'd done it at school too many times for Daniel to count, riled him up, and then when a teacher came was suddenly totally fine. Well, there were no teachers here.

Johnny lifted his hand, Daniel waited, tense and ready for the blow. Daniel would win this time, he'd take whatever Johnny gave him and give him it back a thousand times worse, and then Mr. Miyagi would see, some snakes never change.

"Here, you can tell Mr. Miyagi I hit you first," he said.

Daniel was ready, all coiled up and prepared for the fight. Johnny's hand gently tapped Daniel's cheek, more of a pat to the face than a smack and then he dropped his hand and closed his eyes, bracing for the punch. When it didn't come he opened his blue eyes. Daniel was still furious. His hand balled into a fist. He slammed his fist down into the sand next to Johnny's head.

"What's wrong with you?" Daniel asked. "Are you making fun of me?

Won't fight me anymore? Why because your suddenly too good to fight the champion? Because I'm not good enough? Do you think it was a fluke that I won? What the hell Johnny?"

"LaRusso, do you want to talk or do you want to hit me?" Johnny asked.

Daniel frowned. Johnny wasn't going to fight him. He was just going to take the hits like he felt he was due a few. He was dripping saltwater, soaked, and Johnny was still dry from his shoulders up but was getting wet now from Daniel dripping onto him. Daniel didn't know what to say, his tongue felt leaden, he was so furious. Where was the Johnny he'd fought all school year long? The one who made fun of him at every turn? Did he just pop up to aggravate him and then hide away again? None of this was fair. His hand gripping Johnny's shirt was shaking, Daniel realized *he* was shaking, he didn't know how to direct his anger, didn't know how to deal with this. Johnny was the enemy and yet he wasn't doing anything except having the same stupid face he always had.

"You're from New Jersey and you've been doing karate for less than a year," Johnny said slowly, cautiously like feeling out a frozen-over lake in winter unsure whether it'd crack and he'd fall through. "I've been doing it for over five years and I've lived in California my whole life."

"What's that have to do with anything?" Daniel demanded, those stupid blue eyes, those stupid lips.

"Balance isn't the core belief of Cobra Kai, but I still had to learn it. Kreese made sure we could continue standing despite constant blows. I grew up around here...so I've stood around in the ocean a lot, did so all the time as a kid. Sometimes it was..." Johnny trailed off and then closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "Sometimes it was easier to have salt-crusted skin and clothes than sweaty, and dirty clothes." He paused again. "I spent a lot of time, running into the water to clean up, then using the beach showers to wash off the salt because it was all I had access to."

He wasn't looking at Daniel. Not being able to see his eyes, trying to figure out what he was hiding from him was somehow so much worse, the implications made Daniel's stomach churn.

"So I learned how to not get knocked down by the waves unless I wanted to really early on. And when Mom and Sid married one of the

many things I tried to do was surf. The board...survived about a year."

Johnny was tense underneath Daniel. Daniel's hand relaxed and just rested on Johnny's chest. Johnny's blue eyes flicked open again, looking up at Daniel.

"Less than a year of training and you're still doing so well. You should be proud of your progress and how you're doing. You shouldn't compare yourself to me in this case, you should stop doing that. It's not balanced. I've got over four years more training than you've had a chance or access to as well as home-field advantage. It's not because you're not good, it's just that this is second nature." Johnny fell silent for a beat then frowned. "That doesn't help does it?" Johnny asked. "It sounds conceited like I'm trying to start a fight. I'm not. I really am not trying to start anything. It's just you should really be happy with your own progress. You're doing great. I'm impressed." Johnny sighed when Daniel didn't respond and covered his face with his hands. "I don't know what to say, Daniel, nothing I say isn't going to sound awful to your ears after so long of it being actually awful."

Daniel. He called me by my actual name. Daniel felt his ears burn. It felt too intimate all of a sudden. He had a girlfriend for crying out loud but here he was on the beach sitting on Johnny, throwing a tantrum about the fact he embarrassed himself in front of him and Johnny was trying his best to be helpful but Daniel couldn't not misconstrue his every action and facial expression. He was so used to a fight existing or bubbling up that he was seeing them where there were none.

"If you don't want me around, I can catch a cab home. I don't want to make this worse."

Daniel pulled Johnny's hands from his face. He couldn't help himself. Johnny sounded so miserable. He couldn't let Johnny just take a cab home. He'd never be able to face Mr. Miyagi again. Mr. Miyagi was trying to teach him patience and kindness and all the stuff he wished his dad was still around to teach him.

"I thought you were laughing at me."

"Your face was funny," Johnny admitted with a frown. "You looked like you were going to try and challenge the waves to a fight. I expected you to start yelling at them. But it wasn't-"

"The same as before," Daniel said with a sigh, running a hand through his wet hair. "I keep thinking I've figured it out and then, bam I think you're making fun of me, or the same as before, and then it gets under

my skin and I feel like I've dragged us straight back to square one."

"It's f-"

"Don't you dare say it's fine," Daniel interrupted. "You're trying, right?"

Johnny nodded, his hair was full of sand at this point, his wet clothes were probably caked in it.

"The person I want to be is a person Mr. Miyagi can be proud of. And Mr. Miyagi would not be proud of me right now. It's so slow. I want everything to be better faster. But there's no quick fix no matter how desperately I want there to be one. I mean just one look and it set me off. And yeah it sucks, but you're right, I keep forgetting you've been doing this longer and I was...learning quickly and desperately. Though I think my karate is better than yours," Daniel said.

He felt a tremor underneath him, the challenge had hit, ever so minutely Johnny had taken what he said as an offense. But nothing in his face changed.

"I'm teasing," Daniel elaborated. "Sort of. Mr. Miyagi's karate is amazing. But I think it'll be a while before teasing doesn't come off as fighting words for either of us. There's too much already between us for us to just snap into being friends. Or friendly acquaintances. Allies? Whatever. We were like mortal enemies. Or at least it kind of felt like that. Like I was a mouse you were playing with, trying to eat or something more messed up. But." Daniel rested his hand in front of him on Johnny's chest. "I'd like things to be better, I think we just have to be patient you know? It's the whole balance thing Mr. Miyagi was talking about. He says you need to have balance in your life too, not just in karate and maybe we can balance each other out or something. Could end up being pretty cool."

Johnny was watching him, his blue eyes were stunning, there was something about being under the vast blue sky that made them so much more colorful. Lately, he always looked like he was listening to every word Daniel said. No one listened to *everything* Daniel said. Mr. Miyagi sifted through it like he was an old prospector searching for gold to figure out what Daniel was actually getting at. His mother listened if it was important but a lot of his conversation she just let roll right off of her. She was too used to it. He liked being listened to. He liked having those eyes on him like he was on a stage under a spotlight. And Johnny's lips looked soft. Daniel had a strong urged to lean down and kiss him. *You have a girlfriend, get a grip Daniel.* He

wasn't that kind of boy. Not one to cheat on his girlfriend with an ex-rival. He realized he'd leaned forward a little and pushed himself back.

"LaRusso?" Johnny asked quietly.

"Huh?"

"How long are we going to just sit here with your hand on my chest?"

Daniel glanced down at his hand. It was on Johnny's pec. If Johnny was a girl he would've been slapped so hard his head would've spun.

"I thought your chest would've been pure muscle. It's soft," Daniel said, then realized he'd said it aloud and quickly pulled his hand away like he was burnt and scrambled up.

"Only when I flex. I also only have a six-pack when I flex," Johnny said sitting up.

Daniel didn't know what to do with this information. It was too much. He rushed back towards the water, his face burning. This wasn't good. Knowing his subconscious this tidbit was going to mess with him. The worst part was that he wanted to touch Johnny's chest again, curious what would happen if he gave it a squeeze. He dove into the waves. He couldn't believe he'd said it aloud. Couldn't believe a lot of things about himself. He stood up again, took a deep breath. If ever there was a time for Mr. Miyagi's meditation and breathing techniques it was now. He needed to get ahold of himself.

He stood up and breathed feeling the water try to push and pull him. He rooted his feet into the sand and breathed in through his nose with the tide and out through his mouth. He kept his eyes shut. It helped. Eventually, the pounding of his heart calmed and he opened his eyes. Johnny wasn't on the beach anymore. He didn't know why but he'd expected the boy to be propped up on the sand watching him with those piercing eyes from where Daniel had left him.

He scanned the shores and saw Mr. Miyagi pulling in a fish that he then put in a cooler. Daniel smiled, at least Mr. Miyagi was catching fish. That made Mr. Miyagi happy which in turn made Daniel happy. Daniel stayed standing longer this time without Johnny by his side. If he just focused on himself and didn't make it a competition then he was fine. That was probably the whole point. While this was a test to see where Johnny was, for Daniel this was probably a chance to realize that Johnny was just another kid with his own issues and that

they could work in harmony if they didn't compete. That however would be a never-ending battle.

Daniel felt like he and Johnny could compete over sharpening pencils or something else as utterly ridiculous. And Daniel had to admit he missed that. So much work needed to be done. It was like all the bones had been removed from Johnny and he had to figure out which one went where so he'd prop himself up again and they could just be competitive friends. His cousin got that way. Louie and his best friend could turn anything into a competition but they always had a blast and Daniel wondered if maybe one day that could be him and Johnny. First, though Johnny had to get back to his old self, well a version of himself, Daniel guessed. He didn't want Johnny terrorizing him, but he didn't want him moping either. He wanted to see Johnny smile more, to smirk and laugh and tease but without it sending Daniel into rage or fear. And that would require Daniel to be more balanced. He didn't know how Mr. Miyagi did it. But he always gave Daniel the right thing to do at the right time.

Chapter End Notes

You ever like just have a ton of random knowledge about something that you didn't actually seek out? I've learned a lot of random stuff about muscles lately because it just filters onto my tumblr feed. But a lot of it surprised me that shouldn't have like, of course, muscles aren't hard all the time, I mean I can flex and my arm will be stiff but then relaxed it's not. But I didn't really think it fit with muscle-y people until I started reading about it. I thought they just always looked like that, like in action films. But I also learned that a lot of the times to get that look actors dehydrate themselves which is super dangerous and that six-packs aren't always visible (depends on the person) unless people flex which leads to a lot of people being disheartened that they don't look a specific way because of the way it's showcased in films and magazines.

Here's a source from men's health about it how actors dehydrate themselves for action films (pretty sure the guy from Witcher talked about this too somewhere): https://www.menshealth.com/uk/building-muscle/a757464/why-dehydrating-your-body-to-look-good-is-dangerous/

Anyway, thus the soft pec when not flexed. Thanks for reading.

Drink some water. (Also a note to myself to drink water.)

Escape Route Needed

Johnny watched Daniel disappear under the waves and found a different spot to stand and balance. He'd been so full of hope and he'd allowed himself to dream, he'd thought maybe this could lead to karate and then to sparring. Something he'd always liked to do with his fellow cobras. But clearly, they weren't there. They might never get there and it might just be better to let that dream go. Let the tide carry it out and away.

He dipped himself in the water to clear sand out of his hair and off of his clothes and he felt like a kid again. How many times when they were living out of his mother's car had he come running into the ocean because he was dirty? How many times after his mother and Sid had married had he snuck off on his way home from school to get rid of the mud on his clothes from the older kids, or the one time he'd desperately tried to get the gum out of his hair.

He'd used to believe what his mother had told him the first time she'd brought him to essentially bathe in the sea. That it could wash away every bad thing. But it turned out it didn't work on gum. He'd end up cutting it out of his hair and his Mom wordlessly took him for a haircut. Sid had laughed.

Daniel wasn't falling often Johnny noticed. Clearly being near had thrown him off. Gotten in his head and under his skin. Johnny stood carefully and quietly. He'd hoped the waves would wash away the lingering feeling of where Daniel had touched him. The weight of him, the hand on his chest, the fingers that kept touching his thigh every time Daniel had shifted gears. Johnny wasn't sure if he'd survive the drive back.

Part of him had been desperate, hoping Daniel would tell him to pack up and go home, thinking it'd be the perfect excuse to get out of sitting with the gear shift between his legs and Daniel touching him the entire drive back to Mr. Miyagi's. Clearly, no one was making a big deal about it, except for Johnny. He felt like he was going to fall apart, squeezed between the two of them in the truck. Mr. Miyagi had taken up more space than Johnny ever thought possible, pushing him up against Daniel who didn't make any big deal out of it and all Johnny could hear the entire ride was his heart pounding rapidly in his chest and the gentle whispers of Daniel's fingertips and palm brushing against his thigh.

Johnny breathed. He could handle this. He shifted his feet in the sand and stood firmly. Daniel was moving through the water, hands moving slowly like he was dancing. Kata, it had to be a type of kata. It was beautiful. The sun was glittering off the waves. There wasn't a single hiccup or falter. Just graceful movements through the water. It had clearly all been Johnny. He wound Daniel up too much. The history couldn't be ignored and even though Daniel's face had been funny, it had clearly set him off and Johnny would have to work on that. He hadn't thought Daniel had noticed the smile on his face. He'd thought he'd mastered the neutral look but apparently, it'd broken through more than he'd thought.

After a while, he saw Mr. Miyagi walk along the sandy beach in front of them holding out a large towel. Johnny watched Daniel hop out of the waters and straight into the towel, almost like a little kid out of the bath. Johnny moved slowly through the water towards shore and stood dripping nearby. It was a big towel, almost like a blanket, Daniel was all wrapped up in it but Mr. Miyagi was looking at Johnny expectantly with a warm smile. That was too close. Mr. Miyagi had to realize that right? Yes, the towel was ridiculous and could cover both of them, but getting all up in Daniel's space again so soon was a terrible idea.

"Johnny-san, dry off and we go," Mr. Miyagi said.

Johnny took an obedient but tentative step forward. Mr. Miyagi threw the other side over him and wrapped him in the towel. He found himself chest to chest with Daniel who was staring at him. Johnny couldn't place the look. Did he look ridiculous? Had his hair done something weird after he'd dipped under the surface? Was it because they were too close? Was it because it seemed like Mr. Miyagi thought they were five-year-old boys who'd gotten into an argument over who ate the last cookie and not two teenage boys dripping wet and being forced to share a towel that trapped the humid heat of their wet skin and clothes. They turned and walked back up to the car and Johnny moved slowly and carefully not wanting to rush Daniel and worried about his knee with the uneven sand.

Daniel hadn't come to school in crutches or a boot or a wheelchair, all things Johnny had dreaded. He barely limped. But Johnny remembered Bobby's ashen face when he came back after their fight saying he'd heard a crack. The sound Daniel had made when Johnny swept his leg haunted him, and when he thought Daniel wasn't looking he kept an eye on his gait, wondering if he'd made a miraculous recovery or was just hiding, like the way Johnny had

hidden many injuries in the past. They climbed into the car, Johnny once again crammed between the two of them, feeling too large for the space. He looked at Daniel's knee and frowned, there wasn't any bruising or discoloration, it wasn't swollen. Daniel's hand found its way to the stick shift and moved the truck into reverse to pull away and again to drive. The question bubbled up as Daniel's hand brushed Johnny's knee.

"Is your knee okay?" Johnny asked voice tight.

Daniel glanced at him and barked a humorless laugh, "What, you going to carry me around if I say it bothers me? Suddenly switch over to being a protector? Going to wait on me hand and foot out of guilt?"

"Daniel-san," Mr. Miyagi said a soft warning in his voice.

"Yes," Johnny said quickly. He'd been helping Mr. Miyagi as payback, but he hadn't done anything for Daniel yet. "If you want. I can."

Daniel's eyes flicked over. "You're serious? Listen it hasn't bothered me much, Mr. Miyagi took care of it."

"You didn't go to the hospital?" Johnny asked incredulously. Mr. Miyagi might be amazing but that didn't replace an x-ray.

"No."

"But we might've broken or fractured something," Johnny said.

"It's fine."

"It's not fine. What if all of this is just making it worse?"

Daniel huffed. "It barely bothers me, you're overreacting."

"I'm not, Bobby, he said he thought he heard a crack," Johnny whispered. "And not the kind that happens when you crack your knuckles. The kind that means something much worse. You can fracture something and not realize it sometimes."

Daniel pulled to a stop at a stop sign and looked over at Johnny. "Seriously? It's been over a week. What good would going now do me? Or do you just want to ease your conscious with some x-rays?"

Johnny looked away and Daniel continued on. He chewed at his lip. He remembered the time he crushed a bone in his foot and he'd thought nothing of it, did nothing until the occasional pain persisted

and sent him to the doctors. He couldn't remember when or how he might've hurt himself as he was getting hurt all the time so one specific instance didn't stick out to him. But the physical therapy exercises had eased the pain, made him feel better knowing.

"It helps," Johnny said softly. "To know and if something did happen, to know what to do."

"X-rays are expensive," Daniel said flatly.

"I'll pay."

Daniel was stiff at the wheel, fingers gripping it tightly. Johnny wondered if he'd said the wrong thing. It'd slipped out. He didn't know how much x-rays cost. He didn't know if he could pay for it for Daniel. He thought he could. He did get an allowance and he'd squirreled some of that away in case he ever had to go on the run. He figured cracking into that piggy bank was okay if it was to make sure he hadn't done everlasting damage to Daniel's knee. But maybe Daniel was too proud to be helped. Or maybe he wasn't too proud, he just didn't want help from Johnny.

"Johnny-san right," Mr. Miyagi said. "Better to check so not to make worse."

Daniel's lips were in a tight line, he reached over to grab the stick harshly but miscalculated and nails dug into the flesh of Johnny's thigh. Johnny didn't move, didn't make a sound, and just looked out the windshield at the road. They were getting close to Mr. Miyagi's and soon he'd be able to get into the Avanti and get home. He knew when he was hurt he usually didn't want help, especially not from someone with who he didn't get along. He'd made a mistake offering and trying to press it. He should've kept his mouth shut. Should've thought of a different approach.

They pulled into Mr. Miyagi's home, the truck fitting next to the yellow Ford, and Johnny felt antsy. He needed out of the car asap, he needed to be gone, in the front seat of the Avanti and on his way home with that little bonsai next to him. He needed to breathe in the dirt and listen to his radio. This quietness in the truck felt heavier than the heat of being shoved under a towel next to Daniel. More suffocating. Daniel's hand moved and Johnny's eyes flicked down. His thigh was bleeding, there were angry red scratch marks. Mr. Miyagi was moving slow. Daniel wasn't saying anything.

Next time Johnny decided, if there ever would be a next time, just let

him sit in the back of the truck. That way he could escape, jump over the back, and bolt before he made a fool of himself. The door on Mr. Miyagi's side was opening, Daniel was grimacing, his eyes had slipped down to Johnny's thigh where blood had started to run and Johnny quickly shifted towards Mr. Miyagi, pulling the edge of his shorts down. It didn't do anything, but it'd seemed worth the try to try and cover up the scratches. Mr. Miyagi was finally making his way to the back of the truck to get his fishing equipment out and Johnny was out of the truck.

"Thank you Mr. Miyagi, let me know if you need any more help sometime," Johnny said hurrying over to the Avanti and opening the car door. "Have a good evening."

He'd left the keys in the car because who would even think of stealing his babies while he was here? The bonsai was sitting patiently in the passenger seat. The engine purred to life and he carefully reversed, gave a wave without making eye contact with either of them and as soon as he was past the gates he felt the tension in his shoulders relax. He was still damp and he worried about his seats but this escape was worth it. He'd deal with the damage later, he had a towel around somewhere and he could just dab everything off if he was fast enough. The sun was setting and the sky was full of color.

"Have a good day buddy?" Johnny asked the bonsai. It looked good, nice and green, leaves seemed healthy. "Good."

The Wrong Idea

Daniel sat frozen in the truck looking at the spot where Johnny had been, he'd felt his nails hit skin, harsher than he'd meant. He hadn't meant to claw Johnny but he had and the angry red marks on his thigh were proof. The guy hadn't yelled or made a fuss or anything. Just let him dig his nails into his skin. He could think of at least twenty different ways that could've gone. Johnny socking him, yelling at him, starting a fight, something to cause a wreck and kill them all, but he hadn't said a word. Hadn't made a sound.

He heard the sound of the Avanti's engine and quickly pushed the door to the truck open, heart pounding in his chest. He pushed himself out the door only to get stuck because he'd forgotten to unlatch his damn seatbelt and then he was hopping out of the truck and into the dirt and watching the Avanti speed off. He didn't even get to apologize. He didn't get to explain that he'd meant to grab the stick shift and he'd been upset and hadn't meant to hurt him.

Mr. Miyagi had his fishing gear half in and half out of the truck bed and his eyes slowly left the empty gate and turned towards Daniel. Guilt settled like a lump and then flames of indignation rose up. Why should he have to feel guilty? Johnny was the one trying to put his own guilt to rest by buying his way out of Daniel's life. And Johnny had hurt Daniel worse, more frequently. Johnny was built like a fighting machine, it wasn't fair to compare the two. It wasn't fair to have pitted them against each other.

"Johnny-san trying to help," Mr. Miyagi said.

"What if I don't want his help?" Daniel snapped. He hadn't meant to and he quickly folded his arms over his chest and looked away. "Sorry Mr. Miyagi I just, I don't trust him. What if all of this is a trick? All this nice helpful Johnny?"

Mr. Miyagi took the fishing gear out of the back of his truck and headed towards the house. "Daniel-san, if think everyone is always bad without change then life will be sad and difficult. No one can make mistake and learn. One Strike and out."

Daniel frowned and hurried after Mr. Miyagi. "But Mr. Miyagi what if my gut feeling is right? I should trust my gut right?"

Mr. Miyagi set his things down and tapped Daniel's stomach with his

cooler of fish. "What if wrong? What if misguided by anger?"

He slipped out of his shoes and stepped inside.

Daniel frowned. His mother had been begging him to get his knee looked at since the tournament had ended. Her eyes were always filled with worry and Daniel had brushed it off again and again telling her he was fine, *Mr. Miyagi had worked some magic*. She always responded sharply that it couldn't hurt and then Daniel would remind her how expensive x-rays were. It went around and around and around in circles until Daniel felt sick and locked himself in his room. If Johnny paid for it, then he lost his argument with his mother. She'd make him go anyway, immediately take Johnny up on it because she felt they were owed it.

After all, she mumbled around the apartment about how they were lucky they weren't the suing types. Though Daniel knew it was more likely because he was injured in a competition he signed a waiver for and had entered willingly. It'd probably be thrown out. Plus would they actually sue Johnny or Bobby in that situation or his dojo? Would they sue Kreese? Or would they sue the tournament? A tournament *he won*. Plus they couldn't afford the legal council. It was another argument that had gone around and around and around. If he went home and offered her this maybe she'd calm down. Maybe her eyes wouldn't be filled with so much worry and she'd stop smothering him. And then maybe Johnny would stop treating him like he was made out of glass. But he didn't know what to say.

The door slid open and Mr. Miyagi came out, holding up a shirt.

"Johnny-san forgot, you go take him," he said pressing the soft cloth into Daniel's hands.

"But Mr. Miyagi," Daniel protested but the look in Mr. Miyagi's eyes quelled the rest of his sentence.

He was worried. The way Johnny came to help then would run away. Mr. Miyagi was so determined that Johnny was just a lost scared boy, the way Daniel had been. The only difference was Daniel was loud when he was upset, crying about how much he hated being in Reseda and California and taken from home and his stupid bike. Johnny just took his licks and then escaped. And Mr. Miyagi being Mr. Miyagi wasn't comfortable with letting that be. Clearly one of them had to check in on Johnny and it couldn't be Mr. Miyagi. There was a pointedness to the silence. *Make sure he's alright.*

"Okay Mr. Miyagi," Daniel said. "I'll take it right away."

Mr. Miyagi nodded his head in approval and then dipped back into the house. Daniel groaned burying his head in his hands, why him? Why was it always him? He got a strong smell of Johnny. The shirt was soft against his face and up close the smell didn't trigger his fight or flight response like he would've assumed. It didn't smell bad, the cologne he used. Probably something stupidly expensive. He hopped off the steps of Mr. Miyagi's house grumbling to himself about rich kids, and mostly about Johnny specifically and how stupid of a drive it was and being unable to keep a watch on his own things, what was he a five year old?

The drive to Johnny's house went by too fast and Daniel felt his heart pound, the closer he got the more panicked as realization hit. He'd have to deal with everything. The awkwardness to try to get to Johnny and his room without interacting with the staff, without running into Sid. His mouth went dry and he pulled the Ford outside the gate and parked it. He didn't know how he was going to get in. He saw a dirt bike pull to a stop in front of him and park and a boy get off and shake shaggy hair out of his helmet. He turned and squinted at the yellow Ford and his eyes widened and he came over in a jog. Daniel felt himself panic, his skin got cold and clammy and his fingers curled into a fist around Johnny's shirt.

"I thought that was you," Bobby said.

Daniel had left the window down like some stupid girl in a bad horror movie and it was too late to put it up. Bobby was leaning over it.

"Man, this is a cool ride."

"Thanks," Daniel said.

He hadn't really interacted with any of the ex-cobra's other than Johnny since the tournament and Johnny's words were bowling around in his head, *Bobby, he said he thought he heard a crack.* His hand went to cover his knee, taking Johnny's shirt with it like it was some kind of shield against Bobby. He remembered the pain. It'd been excruciating.

"You here to see Johnny?" Bobby asked.

Daniel nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"If you haven't been here before there's a trick to it. You can't go in the

front door. His step-dad's got the place messed up. You can't ask for Johnny. Or else you'll get this garbage spiel he makes all of the staff say when someone mentions Johnny. There's a back way, want me to show you?" Bobby asked.

Daniel didn't want to go with Bobby, he wanted to run, but Mr. Miyagi had been clear. He swallowed and took a breath then nodded again.

"Cool, your car's fine here. Just lock it up and follow me," Bobby said stepping away from the Ford.

Daniel turned off the engine and got out, locking the car and slipping the keys into his pocket. He was worrying the fabric of Johnny's shirt, it was so soft. He held it tightly in his hand. Bobby glanced at him before heading off around the corner. He pushed on a bit of the fence and it broke off like sawed-off jail bars and he climbed through then turned and waited for Daniel. Daniel followed.

It was getting dark out and the grass looked strange in the darkness. Bobby put the bars back when Daniel was through and hurried across the lawn passed an enormous pool filled with water glittering in the dim light to a back door that he pushed open. Daniel followed him into the house and through the hall up a narrow staircase and then into a hall that looked vaguely familiar. Bobby walked like he knew his way around. He stopped at a door and looked back at Daniel.

"Hey," Bobby said, hands on the doorknob, voice soft. "I'm sorry about your leg and all the shit we did last semester."

Daniel didn't know what to say and Bobby didn't give him a chance, pushing the door open and hurrying in, pulling Daniel along with him. It was that same cologne, it hit like a wave. He'd noticed it the first time but after sticking his face in Johnny's shirt it was more prevalent now. Daniel was pretty sure he'd be able to pick it up out of a collection of smells now. Johnny was sitting on his bed, eyes closed listening to his Walkman. The bonsai was on his desk. There were more books on his desk than last time. Books about World war 2, Okinawa, and a book about the internment camps.

"Damn, did he get a new girl? Or get in a very weird fight with a cat?" Bobby asked.

Daniel tore his gaze off the books and looked at Johnny.

He'd cleaned up the scratches but they were still an angry red and

along his inner thigh up to the top of his thigh. Daniel flushed. From an outside perspective the location was intimate, though Daniel wasn't sure how exactly and was trying to curb his brain from going down that path. Bobby flopped down on the bed next to Johnny and Johnny's eyes snapping open and his hand jumping to his ear to pull the headphone away and look over at Bobby.

"Hey," Johnny said tension fading away.

"I come bearing gifts," Bobby said opening his jacket and pulling out a plastic container, it was full of cookies.

He popped it open and the sweet smell wafted through the air. Bobby then motioned to Daniel and Johnny who'd half reached out for a cookie stopped and his eyes slid over to Daniel, realizing it wasn't just Bobby in his room. The tension returned to his shoulders. Daniel walked across the room and sat down on the edge of the bed, trying to be as casual about it as Bobby had been and tossed the shirt at Johnny's face.

"You forgot this," he said.

It slipped out of his mouth before he realized the implication, before he saw the look on Bobby's face, eyes darting from Johnny to Daniel and then down at Johnny's thigh and back at Daniel.

"Thanks," Johnny said softly.

He threw the shirt into the laundry basket to the side of the room and it went in. Daniel felt a twinge of regret that he pushed down.

"I'm going to take you up on your offer," Daniel continued trying to ignore the look on Bobby's face, the way his eyes were wide and the way his mouth hung open. "When's good?"

"Anytime you want," Johnny said after a moment of hesitation. "I'm at your disposal."

Damn. Bobby was going to get the wrong idea. But Daniel couldn't explain it now, there were too many pieces. He tried to think of what he knew of hospitals and doctors' offices and realized his mother handled all of that.

"You pick the place and time," Daniel said.

If Johnny wanted to be of help he could do all the grunt work. He

realized with a sinking feeling that Johnny probably didn't have his number so he leaned over and grabbed a notebook off the desk and a pen and wrote his number down. He could feel both of their eyes on him as he did so. He handed the notebook over to Johnny then reached over and snagged one of the cookies.

"Call me and pick me up," he said then stood.

"Okay," Johnny said looking at the number on his notebook like he was checking over a math problem for an error. He glanced up and Daniel met his eyes.

"Sorry about scratching you," Daniel said. "Didn't mean to."

"It's nothing," Johnny said.

Daniel nodded and gave a short wave before hurrying out the door. He shut it behind them and leaned against it with a sigh. It seemed so easy. Mr. Miyagi made everything seem so damn easy but it never was. He took a bite out of the cookie. Homemade chocolate chip. It was good.

"Are you fucking or fighting LaRusso?" Bobby asked and Daniel nearly choked on the cookie.

He knew Bobby had gotten the wrong idea, he just hadn't expected him to be so blunt.

"I'm taking him to get his knee looked at. You know the one you and I probably damaged?" Johnny said.

"Oh," Bobby said. "Isn't Tommy's uncle a doctor? What about him?"

"I don't think Daniel would be comfortable with someone related to any of us. I'll call around," Johnny said.

Daniel felt his heart pound and a shiver his spine at the sound of his name. He pushed away from the door and hurried out the path Bobby had showed him, his face feeling hot. The air outside was only just barely refreshingly cooler and he hurried towards the spot in the gate, staring at it in the dark trying to remember which piece came loose. He had to try several before finding it and hurrying to the Ford. His mother was going to be so relieved. And maybe Mr. Miyagi was right, maybe this was a good thing. Maybe the Johnny that said his name softly like it was a precious thing was who Mr. Miyagi saw beneath the surface.

A Taste of Memories

He'd asked around and according to everyone he spoke with, Dr. Fletcher, was the best orthopedic doctor in the area. She'd won awards and he could see them, displayed proudly about the office, glittering in the sunlight. She was also booked solid so it had taken a lot to figure out his in. Turned out like in old societies and children's shows sometimes bartering works out. She was a big fan of the band the Police so Johnny had asked around, traded things like an old signed baseball Sid had given him as a gift after forgetting his birthday again and that he didn't really like baseball or at least not that team, for a signed record collection to a signed guitar from the Police.

Surprisingly simple but it helped to have connections in California, even if some of them were Sid's and the thought was revolting, having to smile and nod and be polite with them about Sid as if he was the best stepfather ever. He'd arrived after school bearing the gift with his best sob story prepared only to trash it last second and just be honest. Dr. Fletcher saw him during her dinner break, and he explained the injury from the karate match, how Bobby had heard a sound, how he'd knocked Daniel to the ground and how the stubborn boy refused to get it checked out. She looked at him, her mouth in a tight line and then at the guitar.

"At least you're taking responsibility," she sighed holding out her hand for it.

Johnny handed it over and she held it gingerly in her hands, scrutinizing the signature and studying it the way Sid studied bottles of wine at the country club, trying to tell if they were really as good quality as promised. Like he, a guy who worked in television knew better than the sommelier. She set it gently down against the wall in her office and turned back taking a bite of her salad and turning to flip through a calendar on her desk. She studied it for several minutes, flipping between pages, "Bring him and a guardian for him at 8 am on Sunday, we're not normally open but it's the only time I'm free."

"Yes ma'am," Johnny said. "Thank you Dr. Fletcher."

"Don't thank me yet," she said. "Who knows what you did to this boy's leg." She opened a drawer and pulled out some forms. "To make things go smoother have him and his guardian fill this out. The second page will be your information for payment, so you fill that one out, okay?"

Johnny nodded taking them in his hands and quickly leaving before she could change her mind. He called and asked Daniel if the appointment time was okay and if his mother was free to come with, relieved when he gave a curt yes, and Johnny promised to pick them up early.

On Sunday he parked the Avanti in front of the South Seas apartment complex. His palms were sweaty as he walked up the steps to apartment twenty to knock on the door. It was like the first time he'd knocked on Ali's door to pick her up for their date, concerned that her parents might open the door first.

Daniel opened the door. His mother was behind him, talking about a list of things she needed to have. Double-checking she had them aloud as she went through her purse. She glanced up at Johnny momentarily before pushing past Daniel and down the stairs towards the Avanti and Daniel locked the door. They headed to the stairs together and after a couple of steps Daniel let out a hiss of pain when he put his weight on his knee.

"I can carry you," Johnny offered, holding out a hand.

Daniel swatted at his hand. "I'm fine you oaf, I just slept wrong." He took another step and winced.

Johnny ducked low and slid himself under Daniel's arm, pulling his weight onto himself, not carrying Daniel but hopefully taking some of the pressure off. Daniel looked up at him but didn't push him away and they slowly made their way down the rest of the stairs. At the bottom, Daniel pushed him away.

"I don't want my Mom to worry," Daniel said a warning in his tone and eyes.

Johnny nodded. "I won't say anything."

They walked to the Avanti. Mrs. LaRusso was sitting in the backseat, eyeing the dashboard curiously, her purse on her lap. Daniel sunk into the passenger seat and Johnny got in, waited until everyone was buckled, and drove them to the doctor's office. Daniel was quiet. Too quiet. His mother did the talking. She'd read up on the doctor and was impressed Johnny had gotten an appointment. Her coworkers were impressed. Johnny didn't know doctors were famous enough that in whatever her line of work was they'd know about it. At the waiting room, Johnny waltzed up to the front desk and spoke softly to the receptionist. Now that they were there he felt even more nervous, he

was trying to remain calm, to keep an air of ease.

He handed over the forms and the lady at the front desk nodded and called Daniel and his mother to the back to see Dr. Fletcher. Not sure what to do sat down in the waiting room as the two walked past him into the back. He flipped through magazines idly before giving up as his heart pounded nervously and frantically in his chest. Soon he'd know how bad he'd fucked up. Soon he'd know the full extent of the damage he and Bobby had done and the weight of it. They'd know whether it was permanent or if things would be okay and if they'd gotten lucky.

When he'd told Bobby what he'd offered, what he'd planned to do Bobby had looked him in the eyes, face deadly serious.

"You tell me what I can do to help," Bobby had said.

Even though Bobby had done the initial damage Johnny didn't think it was fair for him to shoulder the burden. Bobby had protested every step of the way, trying to reel Johnny in at almost every fight where Johnny went too far, trying to stop him from becoming the monster Kreese had found within him and brought to the surface. Johnny wasn't sure who he was anymore but Bobby was kinder than the rest of them. His moral compass had only slightly rusted under Kreese. He remembered Bobby protesting to Kreese so loud he thought for sure the referees heard. He remembered looking at them, unable to say anything, fearing what dissent would cause, fearing Kreese's ire.

Johnny's hands were clammy and he ran them over his jeans, pulling out his Walkman, closing his eyes, and listening to the music. Just like every time Sid started yelling, every time things got to be too much he could just disappear into the music. He'd done it ever since he was little, since his mother had given him the Walkman.

"You know how you like to listen to the radio?" she asked warmly from the driver's seat of the car in the parking lot of the awful apartment they'd had before they'd lost it. Before they'd been evicted because his mother had to choose between food and rent and she couldn't bear to see Johnny go hungry and even though Johnny had always told her he wasn't hungry his stomach always betrayed him.

He'd looked up at her and nodded. It was his favorite part of the car and the restaurant she worked at. He liked listening to the songs. Sometimes on his way to school, he'd pass a shop that sold instruments and the owner was always in there playing. He'd stop for

a while and listen until he'd wasted too much time and was in danger of being late so he'd have to run the rest of the way.

"This allows you to take the songs you like with you, and create your own little bubble, a chance to escape into the music when things get too much," she'd said carefully showing him how to use the machine and then slipping the headphones over his ears.

His eyes had widened because the music was right there, it drowned out everything else and he grinned up at her and she smiled down at him. It'd been one of the gifts he'd ever gotten. She'd patted him on the knee, a motion to stay in the car that he knew. He watched her get out and walk to their landlord, their body language was all tense. They were fighting, arguing about something. Johnny closed his eyes and focused on the music quelling the panic. Everything was okay. His mother had given him this so that he could escape, so he'd be okay when things got bad.

For the longest time, he only had one cassette and he played it over and over and over again until the sound warped and got crinkly. He still had it, in a box somewhere in his room. He couldn't bring himself to throw it out even though he'd bought a replacement. It felt like a shield and to throw it out would throw out any protection he had even if it was threadbare. He'd had to replace the headphones multiple times growing up, but the machine still worked and that was the part that mattered the most.

He'd always wondered how his mother got it. They could barely afford food, let alone splurge on something like a Walkman. But he'd never dared ask. He'd tried asking once about the time before Sid, about the time they lived in their car, but Laura's face had darkened so suddenly he quickly vowed never to ask again. He vowed not to complain to her about Sid, never to tell her all the things he did or said, he'd just suck it up and be quiet. Because he knew how much she'd sacrificed for him and knew there was a lot more she probably had to suffer that she'd never tell him.

Something hit his foot and he cracked his eye open and took in Daniel. He was leaning on one crutch the other one tapping at his foot. His face was all frowns and Johnny's mouth went dry. He scrambled to turn off the music and let his headphones fall around his neck slipping the Walkman safely into his jacket pocket and standing. Mrs. LaRusso stood behind him, her face was unreadable.

"The receptionist wants to chat with you," Daniel said.

There were a million questions bubbling up in his chest and he clamped them down hurrying over to the front desk where the receptionist didn't actually talk to him just handed him the bill. It was exorbitant but feasible. He wouldn't be able to run away from home and live in the lap of luxury, but he'd still have enough money for gas out of town and a room somewhere for a month. He pulled out his checkbook, something he didn't normally carry on him, and wrote the check, carefully making sure the amount matched up between the bill and then balancing and counting the numbers in the back. He hated taking Sid's money anyway, this was a better use for it, he told himself. Plus it wasn't like he was paying for karate classes anymore or *any* classes.

The woman took the check and then gave him a nod. He turned and looked at the two LaRusso's. Daniel turned away from him and started swinging himself towards the door on the crutches. Johnny rushed over, opening the door. He nearly offered to carry Daniel again but was afraid the boy would slam one of those crutches into him if he opened his mouth so he kept it shut. They walked to the Avanti, the LaRusso's uncharacteristically quiet. Johnny didn't know what to do. He was dying to know, he needed to know. It must've been absolutely terrible news. He felt a little dizzy as he opened the driver's door. He must've shattered Daniel's kneecap. Busted it up like some villain mob boss in a movie. Daniel wouldn't be able to run again, not from bullies and with that big mouth of his and penchant for trouble that was a death sentence. Johnny had maimed him and Daniel would die somewhere, having pissed off some bikers or a gang. He turned to look past Mrs. LaRusso and picked up the bonsai and carefully put it in his own lap. The weight of it calmed him. The smell of the dirt and the leaves that brushed against him. He put his keys in and drove.

"Hey," Daniel said from beside him, Johnny could hear the frown in his voice. "This isn't the way back home."

"No," Johnny agreed.

"You can't just abduct us! Ma's got stuff to do today. Heck, I've got stuff to do today. Mr. Miyagi and I-"

At least he was talking again. He was getting all pissed off, but Johnny was getting used to that. It seemed no matter what Johnny did it pissed Daniel off. But the flame in him that usually rose up to meet Daniel's fighting words had been doused and stomped out. If Daniel wasn't going to tell him what the prognosis was then Johnny was going to continue on as planned but not say what the plan was. Let

him stew. It wasn't like he could throw himself out of the moving car without freaking his mother out and getting even more injured. Or at least Johnny hoped. Daniel did some stupid shit. Like continuously bait Johnny when he knew Johnny's response to baiting was to kick his ass. Was. Fully past tense. It *was* his response.

He eased into the parking lot of the carhop. A girl in skates rolled over on roller skates as he cut the engine and Mrs. LaRusso looked around eyes wide with delight.

"I haven't seen one of these in years," she said with a grin, happily taking a menu.

"My mom always took me here after a doctor's appointment," Johnny said.

She had, usually because their ice cream was super cheap, one swirl cone for a kid was practically free. Especially when his mother told the waitress what a good boy he'd been at the doctor or dentist. They always gave her a discount when she said that and the ladies had cooed over him and sometimes brought him French fries on the house. He loved it so much he barely noticed his mother never bought anything for herself. When he got his own car and driver's license the first thing he did was drive his mom back to buy her a real lunch. They came back frequently and tried everything on the menu until they nearly got sick.

Daniel's eyes were on him as he thanked the waitress for the menu and handed one over to Daniel. Their fingers brushed and lingered for a second too long. Mrs. LaRusso was talking enthusiastically about the options on the menu. It reminded him of his mom and he wondered if he snuck her back some fries if she'd be happy or hurt that he'd taken the LaRusso's there without her.

Daniel opened the menu suspiciously, eyebrows furrowed.

Johnny knew what he wanted. He knew the menu backward and forwards. His order was simple and cliché: cheeseburger, fries, chocolate shake. In the California sun, the shake would melt before he could get it home, so he couldn't bring his mother back one. But fries, he'd done that before. It'd worked out.

He trusted his mother in his car to eat he realized suddenly but there was a chance the LaRusso's who spoke with their hands flying every which way would spill on his leather seats. He swallowed the grimace at the thought. It'd be fine. He could clean it up.

The waitress skated back with a notepad and pen ready to take their order. Johnny placed his, adding the second set of fries to take home, and then motioned to the guests in his car. Mrs. LaRusso happily asked many questions about the items on the menu, asking the waitress what *her* favorite was and what sold the best, and how were the onion rings? What about the shakes, did they use real stuff or the powders? Oh, what about the malts? It'd been years since she'd had a good chocolate malt. The waitress smiled patiently answering her questions and taking her order when she settled, a burger, onion rings, and chocolate malt. Johnny felt like they'd probably all order about the same thing.

The waitress skated around to the other end of the car and Johnny carefully lifted the bonsai off his lap and set it in the backseat next to Mrs. LaRusso, nearly having forgotten it was there if he hadn't noticed the look the waitress had given him as her eyes flicked down to his lap. Daniel was leaning over the side of the car towards the waitress pointing to things on the menu. He ordered a chili dog, fries and a strawberry shake then she skated off to put their orders in. Daniel sank back into his seat with a frown that was almost a pout on his lips, arms crossed.

"Why didn't you just say you were driving us somewhere for lunch?"

Saying it was to rile Daniel up more in a petty manner seemed like backsliding. Saying something like *If you trusted me you wouldn't have freaked out.* Also seemed the wrong thing. Countering with *Well you haven't told me anything about the appointment I paid for or your knee.* and how the wait to learn how bad it was felt like pure torture also seemed likely to set Daniel off. There was nothing he could say so he shrugged.

Daniel was watching him and he turned his whole body towards Johnny and uncrossed his arms. Mrs. LaRusso leaned forward from the backseat and her hand came down onto Johnny's shoulder. He flinched. He hadn't meant to, it was completely involuntary, he'd been doing it anytime someone touched his shoulders. And he could hear Kreese's snide laughter in his head for it. Thankfully she didn't say anything.

"Doctor said he should elevate his leg and use crutches on days it hurts. She did all sorts of stuff, used more machines than I knew they even had to look at his knee. The damage isn't that bad. He just should've gone in sooner, *which I told him*," she said pointedly shooting a look at Daniel who didn't meet her gaze. "No more crane kicks for

awhile, he's got exercises he's got to do at home, and he's got an out of P.E. free card that she signed for the rest of the school year. She was a great doctor. Explained everything very basic like so we understood and was firm and didn't take any of Daniel's sass."

Johnny nodded looking at Daniel.

"I'm glad it's treatable," he said trying to hold the relief out of his voice knowing it was another thing that'd probably set Daniel off.

"Daniel said Mr. Miyagi did something right after he got hurt, probably helped keep the injury from being too bad," Mrs. LaRusso said.

Johnny felt cold. He was indebted to Mr. Miyagi beyond what he thought. Every time he turned around he felt like the hole he was in was deeper, the shovel in his hand covered in dirt he didn't remember digging. Driving the old man around and helping him with chores wasn't going to be enough. Johnny wondered what he could get Mr. Miyagi. Or make him. He seemed to appreciate homemade things, which was good because it meant he wouldn't have to deal with Sid. Maybe he could build Mr. Miyagi a greenhouse for his trees, but then again the California sun might just bake all of them if he built it wrong. It wasn't like Johnny knew how to construct anything. Maybe he could buy him a ticket back to Okinawa, just to visit, round trip airfare, first class. But there had been something quiet in Mr. Miyagi, how he didn't talk about going back to Okinawa that made Johnny wonder if there was something keeping him from going home, something beyond money.

It would also probably piss Daniel off if Johnny sent his sensei away all of a sudden, even if it was an all-expense paid vacation. Maybe if it was a cruise or something with people his own age where he could meet ladies... he frowned. Daniel would straight-up murder him. Plus Mr. Miyagi didn't seem to be that type of guy and that's what Johnny liked about him. He wasn't always ogling every female specimen in eyeshot, unlike Sid who did it even when his mother was right there. The bar was remarkably low Johnny realized with a sinking feeling. And yet somehow he'd found himself buried underneath it, desperately trying to claw his way back up.

The waitress skated back coming to a stop next to the Avanti and fitted trays on three of the windows and Johnny thanked her. She flashed him a big smile and handed him the check and he quickly handed her the bills while the LaRusso's were distracted. Mrs. LaRusso

was explaining the carhops from when she was a kid and talking about some guy, some friend, Johnny guessed and how their parents would take them to places like this late at night like a treat and how it was the coolest place to be. Daniel listened, turned in his seat looking back at her, spine all twisted as she explained how it'd been before drive-throughs. Johnny glanced at her in the rearview, she spoke quickly, animated hands moving like Daniel. Johnny wondered if that was their whole family. What Thanksgiving and other holidays must be like all crammed in at some warm big table. Did they accidentally smack each other if they were sitting next to each other talking and not paying attention? Did that start a fight or were they used to it? Her eyes flickered to him and he looked away, caught, but catching the sparkle and mirth in her eyes.

Their food came and the conversation, dwindled only momentarily while Daniel took in the novelty of it all and then tried his chili dog. He *had* to pick the messiest item on the whole damn menu when he was in the Avanti, didn't he? It was like he was constantly baiting Johnny. Even though they had a truce, even though Johnny was trying to make amends Daniel still was poking him and prodding like *I dare you, I double-dog dare you to fight me here right now in front of my mom, show your true colors, will you?*

Johnny wondered if he did it on purpose or if Daniel just had a blissfully unaware knack for getting people riled up and making choices that were so stupid he was lucky he'd survived this long. What was Johnny going to do? Would he have to follow Daniel around the rest of their lives and keep him out of trouble? Apologize to biker gangs that *he doesn't realize what he's saying is fighting words* or *he didn't mean to offend* and *he's just this pipsqueak without a large mouth* and *he could probably kick like one of your asses but as a gang, it's really unfair so I guess you'll have to fight me instead.* He was surprised Mrs. LaRusso's hair wasn't stark white. Johnny wouldn't be surprised if he greyed early if he decided to take that path, not that Daniel would let him. He'd have to do it on the sly.

The burger was good, tasted like memories. He'd never brought anyone else here he realized all of a sudden. In their two years of dating, he hadn't taken Ali. Ali had been born into a nice family. The Mills had expensive taste and Sid had given him a date fund. Money to spend to *show her a good time.* And Sid had, before his first date with Ali grabbed his arm in a vice-like grip and said real low so no one else heard, *The Mills are a nice family, don't you dare make a fool of me.* Johnny hadn't understood why his dating Ali had anything to do with Sid. But he saw the Mills talking with Sid at the country club,

laughing and getting along and how easy they were to charm and realized to them it was a good match because of Sid and Sid found some worth in him because Ali agreed to date him.

Johnny had rebelled on their first date, taking her to Golf 'n stuff. They'd had a blast and went back often. But he also got their names on reservation lists at fancy restaurants and took her dancing and all the rich kid shit he hated and they laughed about it, both knowing that their parents preferred them being there than out at some amusement park. That they'd rather the kids go to the opera than the movies, to show they had culture and class.

Johnny didn't think Ali could handle some drive-in theater or carhop. Her parents would've flipped, Sid would've heard about it and flipped. And the guys, they would've been insufferable. Bobby maybe would've behaved, but he could just see his car full of cobra's turning into a flirting machine likely to get Johnny banned from his favorite childhood place. But the LaRussos he realized appreciated it for what it was. They weren't too good for it, Daniel wasn't going to hound the waitress for her number and would just let her work without ogling her. Though if he had Johnny might've smacked him for Ali's sake. But Daniel was a good kid. He wasn't like that even though that's exactly what Johnny thought he was at first. Some slick kid from out of town trying to win Ali over with soccer tricks and obvious flirting while Ali was on the rebound and Johnny wasn't ready for her to move on. Just like he hadn't been ready for her to break up with him and to lose something that kept him in good standing with Sid.

Daniel was talking to his mother about back home, back in Newark trying to find something to compare the food to. He was talking with his mouth full and too fast. Everything about the two of them was relaxed. They were talking about restaurants they missed, the food they missed, mostly good Italian food, and laughing about things like the weird pizza they'd seen or found.

When they were done the waitress took their stuff and handed Johnny his fries for his mother and he started the car. Mrs. LaRusso shot forward all of a sudden,

"Wait Johnny!" she said and he paused blinking back at her. "We can't just leave." There was incredulity in her voice like she'd caught him doing something bad.

"Did I forget something?" Johnny asked wondering if she wanted a malt to take home.

"We've got to pay," she said opening her purse and holding out her wallet pointedly.

Johnny laughed and reversed the car out of the lot. "Already paid Mrs. LaRusso."

"When?" she asked shocked.

"Seatbelt on Mrs. LaRusso," Johnny said as he stopped at the edge of the carhop waiting.

She sunk back and put her seatbelt back on, eyebrows furrowed with confusion.

"I paid after we ordered when she set the trays up."

"Johnny Lawrence!" Mrs. LaRusso said. "How sneaky! I didn't even notice."

Johnny bit back his response, *I may have made mistakes but I'm not that bad am I? That you'd automatically assume I'd try to dine and dash?* He smiled the way he'd been trained, charming but fake. The sneaky scuffle to pay was something he did all the time with Ali. He'd excuse himself to go to the bathroom and would pay for their meal early, or she'd say she wanted to take a closer look at the art out in the lobby and when they went to leave he'd find the bill already paid. It was a habit at this point, to pay before someone else noticed. An inside joke of theirs that he realized now made it look like he was a criminal because why not? Already hurt her baby boy multiple times so of course, he'd also be a thief in her eyes, she probably thought he spent his weekend's robbing stores and stealing purses off of little old ladies for kicks. A warm hand found his knee and he glanced over at Daniel who gave his knee a squeeze.

"Thanks for lunch," he said warmly before pulling his hand back. It was sincere. His face too open and warm and Johnny had to look away, eyes on the road.

"Of course," Johnny said feeling the ghost of Daniel's hand lingering warmly there and missing the weight of it, they rolled to a stop at a stoplight. "Do you guys need to pick up anything at a pharmacy or anything before I take you home?" he asked, voice loud enough to carry to the back to Mrs. LaRusso, eyes flickering to the rearview so he could see her response.

"No, it's fine," Daniel said.

"We have some things to pick up," she said opening her purse and pulling out a prescription. She rattled off the pharmacy name and address. Johnny nodded.

"Ma!" Daniel whined.

"Doctor said you needed this stuff. Stuff for pain and whatnot," Mrs. LaRusso said flatly in a tone that barred no argument.

Daniel grumbled leaning his arm against the window and sticking his chin against his palm with a deep frown and pout watching the scenery pass. Johnny watched the city change as they entered Reseda and wondered if he should go in and buy the medication for Daniel or if that was too much. He wondered if they'd want him to go in or if knowing what medication had been prescribed was too much information, if Daniel would be more miffed. He parked the car in front of the pharmacy and his fingers hovered over his seatbelt. Mrs. LaRusso was up and out of the car hurrying to the pharmacy before Johnny could come to a decision.

"Sorry," Daniel said, softly and partially out the window as if he was apologizing to the bird hopping around on the concrete.

Johnny turned to him confused.

"After paying for the appointment and all the tests which she saw the price for and I've never seen her pale so fast, she refused to tell me how much it was, I swear I thought she was going to faint. It was a bit much. It was probably too much Johnny," Daniel said. "I think she wanted to get lunch, like pay for it you know? She makes this big deal of it with my uncle Louie, they fight over the bill and it seems like it's this big fight but they're just playing, so, yeah, she didn't mean it badly she just, she's got a lot of pride and it's hard to find some teen kid is treating her and taking care of things. Heck, she yells at me if I try to make dinner. Makes this big wounded deal about it, how her pride as an Italian mother is at stake. Even though she loves it when she comes home to a meal already made." Daniel turned towards Johnny and his warm hand found Johnny's knee again and he patted it. "Doctor explained to her all the shit you went through to get that appointment for me, and she saw the price, she doesn't think poorly of you you know. She knows you're trying to make things right. And I guess I do too. So don't let her get to you. She really didn't mean to insinuate that you'd dined and dashed."

Johnny lowered his gaze. He couldn't meet Daniel's eyes, if he'd seen

through Johnny so easily then who knows what would happen if he held his gaze. He looked down at the hand still on his knee, soft, warm, and tan. The weight of it was comforting. Almost as much as holding the bonsai.

"And sorry for not telling you what the doctor said. I wanted to see you squirm," Daniel admitted, Johnny glanced over quickly. There was a grin on his face, playful. "I let it go too long though. You can breathe easily. I'm fine or I'm going to be fine. I just might one day be one of those old men who complain when it rains about my knee."

He laughed at the thought of it and gave Johnny's knee another squeeze. For a second Johnny wondered if it was a threat. Kreese would've told him it was, his enemy going to wound him, an eye for an eye. But it was gentle, the grip soft. More like how his friends would squeeze his shoulders or his arms. The way his mom used to squeeze his cheeks and hold his face in her palms and whisper *How did I get so lucky?* Which always confused him because he didn't feel like they were lucky, not compared to the other families in his schools, or the other families he saw. Lucky families didn't have parents overworked and still unable to pay for electricity or water, didn't get eviction notices or agree to marry an abusive asshole because it meant a roof over their head and food in the fridge. Lucky families were like his friend's families or Ali's, maybe even Daniel's family. Not Johnny's. Daniel's hand was still on his knee, a warm soothing pressure.

"I'm glad you're okay," Johnny said quietly.

"Yeah?" Daniel asked, that playful smile still there when Johnny glanced over. "Glad you don't have to carry me around everywhere?"

"Glad I didn't ruin your chance of making it to an old age," Johnny said.

"What does that mean?"

"You need both legs to run away from the fights you start," Johnny said.

"I don't start fights. I don't strike first, that's a cobra kai thing," Daniel protested.

"You don't *mean* to start fights," Johnny said. "But you rile people up and I worry that someday you're going to have to outrun a hornet's nest that you kicked thinking it was a soccer ball or something. I'm

relieved that you'll be able to."

Daniel frowned at this, "Seriously? I can take someone in a fight. I took you on remember?"

"Yeah, you did. You did good," Johnny said. "But you also kept riling me up every chance you got. Like you just couldn't leave me alone. You kept pushing my buttons."

Daniel looked stunned, mouth open a little, he pulled his hand back from Johnny's leg and his eyes hardened.

"Cause and effect," Johnny said softly.

He wanted to stop talking, needed to stop talking, he hadn't planned to tell Daniel this but he was worried, worried Daniel would keep getting into fights and get hurt worse.

"I hate how I reacted to every button you pushed, everything I perceived, and how I let being in a group fall into a sort of dangerous mob mentality. But it was like I'd be minding my own business on a hike and you'd suddenly pop out and smack me on the face and run off like some stupid cartoon so I'd give chase. But in cartoons, your character is always fine, and my character always loses and I honestly just worry about what will happen if you do that to someone when Mr. Miyagi isn't around to save you, or if you do that to someone more dangerous than a stupid group of high school kids who do karate. Just promise me you'll try to be careful."

Daniel didn't respond.

He shouldn't have said anything. He had no right to ask Daniel to be more careful, to ask him to promise him anything. It probably wasn't his place and he was grateful when Mrs. LaRusso came back bag in hand and slipped into the backseat oblivious to the tension, talking a mile a minute about the pharmacy and the conversation she'd had with the pharmacist about Daniel's knee and how the pharmacist knew all about that having twisted a knee while snowboarding. Johnny was grateful for her chatter as he pulled into the South Seas apartment complex.

"Need any help?" Johnny asked, doubting Daniel would want him helping him up the stairs the way he had done helping him down.

Sure enough, he got a surly, "No." followed by the slam of the Avanti's passenger door which made him wince.

Mrs. LaRusso told him bye, gathering up her stuff and hurrying ahead of her son to unlock the apartment. Johnny waited, watching them disappear through the gate, and could barely see them make their way up the steps to the apartment. He strained to hear the door open and he leaned back with a groan. He really was trying, but it seemed his best, his attempts just were never good enough. He twisted and picked up the bonsai settling it gently into the warm seat Daniel had vacated.

"Like watching a train wreck huh?" Johnny asked it before driving home, ready to drop his fries off with his mom and lock himself in his room the rest of the day so he could think about how much he'd fucked up when he'd promised himself he'd be good.

Changing Sides

"You didn't even say goodbye to that boy," Lucille admonished setting her bags down on the kitchen island as Daniel hopped in. "It's the very least you could've done."

"Well at least I didn't insinuate he was a thief," Daniel said sourly, hoping past her towards the couch to put his leg up like the doctor had told him.

"What does that mean?"

"Ma, you flipped out thinking he dined and dashed, and you're mad at me for not saying goodbye? What do you want me to do kiss his hand for driving us around? He's literally just trying to ease his conscience. He doesn't actually give a shit."

"Daniel!" Lucille gasped grabbing a pillow and smacking him on the head with it.

"Ma!" Daniel complained, he sighed. He could feel the disapproval in her eyes, she was a second away from a lecture, he threw his arm over his eyes. "He told me he was glad I was okay because apparently, I'm always getting into fights because I push people's buttons and he said he was worried I wouldn't be able to run away. How messed up is that?"

He waited for her to agree with him, waited for a response. He got nothing. He pulled his arm from his face and looked up at her. She was chewing on her thumbnail the way she did when she was mulling over telling him something he probably wouldn't like. Like when she told him they were moving, or that Dad was dying.

He pushed himself up suddenly. "What! You don't agree with him?"

She sunk down next to him on the arm of the sofa, hands coming to his face and brushing her fingers through his hair. "Oh Daniel, everyone in Newark knew you meant no harm, but you had Louie with you to watch your back and explain that you were just joking. Here though, how everything went down... You know how little birds will sometimes pull on a big bird's tail feathers to get a rise out of them? Sneaking up when their backs turned and then yanking before flying off? You do that honey. Not always, but sometimes. You like to make people laugh and sometimes you pick the wrong target and they

don't laugh with you. Remember your old science teacher?"

"Yeah," Daniel said uneasily.

"At our teacher meetings, all the other teachers said you were a joy to have, that you tried to make everyone laugh and have a good time and that you were helpful and friendly. He, however, said you were a class clown and that you teased the other kids. I think his exact words were 'You know that cliché of a boy who pulls the girl's pigtails because he likes her? Daniel does that, but to everyone, and one of these days he's going to do it to the wrong kid and end up with a black eye.' It felt like a damn premonition when you came home with a black eye as soon as we moved here."

Daniel flushed red. "I wasn't flirting with Johnny Lawrence!"

Lucille laughed and patted him on the shoulder. "I love you kiddo and I don't want you to change, ever, but I get his concern. Sometimes the people who care about you the most give you the harsh truths you don't want to hear. And you can't tell me Johnny Lawrence doesn't care, he proved that today in spades," she said standing up and leaving him to stew.

He wondered if she was right. If Johnny *did* care about him, and why the thought of that made his chest warm. Like it was finally defrosting the way his heart had frozen when he'd seen Johnny flinch when his mother had touched his shoulder. How he'd wanted to comfort him and thought maybe Johnny couldn't handle someone touching his shoulders or getting close to his neck anymore. It made sense. He'd seen what Kreese had done. When he'd flinched when Daniel touched him at Mr. Miyagi's he'd thought it was because it was Daniel. Like he was trying to stop himself from pushing him off, some involuntary thing. But for him to flinch because of the gentle touch of his mother was telling of just how deep that wound went.

It's why Daniel had gone for his knee this time to try and express comfort. He liked to think that was who he was. A comforting friend who was there for anyone if they needed him, even his ex-karate rival and ex-bully. Johnny hadn't protested, hadn't shoved his hand off, so he figured it was okay. But it had been that fake charming smile that had really set a stake into Daniel's heart. The *I'm-fine* face that wasn't real. Daniel didn't know how he'd known it was fake. It'd been one of the new looks he'd seen that day, like the peaceful look on his face when they'd come out of the doctor's office when Daniel had been planning to run over and spill everything but then had seen how

peaceful he was and it irked him. Head back listening to music, blue eyes shut.

He'd thought Johnny would've been waiting with bated breath to hear the news and that he'd see the look of horror as soon as Daniel hopped out on the crutches. He'd been craving it the way he sometimes craved his mother's home-cooked Italian food. He'd wanted to tease him for just a moment but he'd looked so at ease in the doctor's office that Daniel had wanted to play it out and his mother had agreed. A little teasing for the damage, an extra price to pay.

But he'd been so quiet and tense and then hadn't driven them home and Daniel panicked. He hadn't expected to be taken out for lunch after, let alone to somewhere that Johnny and his mother went to that didn't seem fancy or rich. It screamed normal and the soft way Johnny had said it, like the place was special made Daniel's heart flutter like Johnny hadn't taken anyone else there except them.

And he got it for a moment, with this version of Johnny he could see why Ali had dated him for two years. A soft Johnny that let you in. That and the muscle and the blonde hair and the striking blue eyes that he'd been unable to keep his eyes off of. The Johnny who let him eat a chili cheese dog in his beloved Avanti. And if his mother had leaned over right then and there and said Johnny cared about him Daniel would've agreed. And then he'd seen that mask slide over his face as they were leaving, and that charming smile that sent a shiver down his spine because it was fake. It didn't reach his eyes. His shoulders were too tense. His body language was wrong.

He'd played over the conversation in his head over and over until he sifted through and realized what had happened. Johnny was a lot of things, but a thief wasn't one of them, not really. Johnny had been doing so good, had been so open, or at least more open than Daniel had ever seen before and he felt bad. Wanted to pull the boy into a hug and tell him he was okay that his mother hadn't meant that. But all he could do was awkwardly pat his leg and squeeze his knee for some stupid reason because he thought touching his shoulder was out of the question. And then Johnny had to open his mouth and say something so stupid, but apparently not stupid enough to *only* be Johnny's idea.

Daniel wanted to call Ali, wanted to see Ali. He needed to get his mind off of stupid Johnny and his stupid opinions and what better way to handle that than to spend time with his girlfriend? His mom brought him the phone and he called her. They'd meet up for the

movies and go see something fun. She'd pick him up in her car and Daniel sighed relaxing back into the couch. This is what his life should be. A teenage boy should be out with his girl having fun, not moping over what some blonde oaf said to him in the car or how hurt he'd looked in that split second he'd thought no one had seen.

Ali and his mother chatted for a while while he changed into something more suitable for a date. Trying not to remind himself how much time he'd spent in front of the mirror that morning trying to pick something cool as if he was trying to impress Johnny. He remembered Ali saying how much she liked his hoodies, so he made sure to grab one on his way out of his room after fixing his hair for the third time and hurried to where she stood, wearing a cute dress and pink lip gloss that made his eyes immediately go to her lips. He wondered if that was how makeup worked, like art, it was meant to draw your eyes to one focal point and with Ali it was her lips. He was halfway out the door with his arm around her when his mother called after him.

"Your crutches Daniel!" she said and he winced.

"Crutches?" Ali asked eyes wide.

"I'll explain later," Daniel said quickly. "I'm fine Ma!" he called. "We're going to the movies, it's not a lot of walking." He let the door shut and hurried towards the stairs with Ali.

"Can I drive?" Daniel asked, knowing the answer was no.

"Oh definitely not," Ali said with a laugh hurrying past him to take the driver's seat as if she expected he'd try and sneak in there ahead of her and then refuse to move. He wondered if that move would work if he could ever beat her to the driver's seat and win it by not budging. He moved instead to the passenger seat.

"So," Ali said slowly and pointedly as she pulled out of the apartment complex.

"So," Daniel repeated with a grin.

"Crutches?" Ali asked, reminding him.

"Right, went to the doctor about my knee,"

"*Finally*."

"Hey, I thought you were on my side."

"Yeah but only on the surface. I agree with your mom."

Daniel groaned, apparently even the people he thought were in his corner weren't. It was a conspiracy. "Yeah, well I'm fine, 'kay? Just exempt from gym for the rest of the year unless it's like something I can do without bending my knee, or moving my knee, or putting pressure on my knee."

Ali shot him a worried look. "What about prom?"

"Oh I'm fine for prom," he said with a laugh.

Ali relaxed. "Good," she said relieved.

"But if I've got to do a lot of walking the doc wants me to use crutches. And I've got to keep my leg elevated which is annoying."

"I'm glad you went. What changed your mind? I know you were worried about the price."

"Johnny paid for it."

Ali's head swiveled to look at him so fast he thought she was possessed. "Johnny? Johnny Lawrence?"

"Yeah," Daniel said quietly. "I figured with Ma freaking out over it all the time I might as well take him up on the offer. I mean he did the damage why not let him pay for it right?"

Ali chewed on her bottom lip looking out at the street in front of them as she drove to the theater. He wondered if, even though he wasn't praising Johnny if this type of selfless act won points with her. If he should've kept his mouth shut. He had money to burn, so he would've thought it'd be low on the list of charitable ways he could redeem himself. At least for Ali.

"Did you spend all day with him?"

"Not all day, but we went to lunch afterward and he drove us so Mom could pick up my prescriptions," Daniel said.

Was he in trouble with her? Was hanging out with her ex a no-no? Everyone had told him to let go of the feud between the two of them but Ali had egged him on, laughing and saying Johnny deserved it and Daniel was beginning to doubt he actually did.

"How's he doing?" she asked quietly.

"Wracked with guilt," Daniel said, laughing trying to make the atmosphere light again and failing. It wasn't really funny. "I mean, he's quiet. He's not like punching me anymore or like anything like that. He's just quiet."

Ali nodded thoughtfully. "Did he... mention me?"

"Not today, no," Daniel said. It felt awkward.

He felt like if she continued down this path he might explode. He'd need to know why she'd broken up with him. Why she hadn't stopped the fight between Daniel and Johnny by saying *dude this is my ex, we just broke up, he's not really bothering me I can handle it.* Why instead she let things play out. If Ali had explained things, said anything to clue Daniel in that it wasn't his business then maybe things would've been different. Maybe Daniel and Johnny would've been friends and he'd get to sit at a table at lunch full of cool kids and not just at a table of pity with his girlfriend.

He yearned for that other reality, where he got on the soccer team, hung out with Mr. Miyagi because he was cool, and learned his karate because it was cheaper than Cobra Kai. He realized suddenly that a part of him blamed Ali almost as much as he'd blamed Johnny for his misery.He wanted to know about the Johnny that was head over heels in love with Ali and the Ali who dumped him and moved on so fast straight into Daniel's arms like she was rebelling and using Daniel to get some sort of revenge. Maybe he was being toyed with, a rebound who didn't know he was a rebound and was bound to get hurt. He shook his head, this was no way to think about his girlfriend.

"Oh," was all she said.

They pulled into the lot and got their popcorn and sodas and milled into the cool dark room taking their seats. Their hands found each other during the movie and it was sweet, it was nice and he needed to stop thinking about Johnny and the way he wanted to drag his hand up from Johnny's knee and see how much this new nice Johnny let him get away with. Fuck. Johnny and his old science teacher were right.

He felt popcorn hit his head and he turned feeling his heart sink. Cobras. Bobby, Tommy, Jimmy, and Dutch were sitting a couple of rows back and Dutch was throwing popcorn at them. Johnny wasn't there and Bobby was swatting at Dutch to get him to stop. Tommy and

Jimmy were grinning like this argument between the two of them and the popcorn flying was the most entertaining thing they'd seen in ages.

"It's Dutch isn't it?" Ali whispered next to him, fingers tightening around his hand.

"Yeah, whole gang minus their leader," Daniel said sourly.

They were supposed to leave him alone. But he guessed cobras don't keep promises. Eventually, the hail of popcorn stopped and Daniel glanced back because he heard a cry of protest. Bobby had taken the popcorn from Dutch and moved away and was shoveling it into his mouth as if he could eat all of Dutch's weapons before Dutch could get over his shock and chase Bobby down. Jimmy and Tommy had moved faster and were next to Bobby, helping him eat all the popcorn, and outnumbered Dutch sunk sulkily into his seat.

His eyes met Daniel's and he sneered flipping Daniel off, but then folded his arms across his chest, kicked his legs up onto the back of the chair in front of him, and watched the movie. Okay, so maybe not all cobras were going to be a pain in his ass the rest of the year. Maybe just old habits died hard. Maybe as long as Bobby was around to reign the others in everything would be okay. It was flimsy, like a shield made out of tissue paper but it was better than nothing especially if the weapon was food and not fists.

"It's okay now," Daniel whispered to Ali whose hand was gripping Daniel's hand so hard that he thought she was trying to crush it.

He wondered what her problem was. The popcorn wasn't hitting Ali, they'd been aiming at Daniel the whole time. Just like always. Daniel was the target and Ali was left alone if not just teased a little. Her status and years of going to school with them, *popularity*, protected her but left Daniel out in the cold and he was starting to resent that. It wasn't fair. It hadn't been fair at all. He felt like he'd been tricked into a feud, a trap that everyone else who was local knew about but him.

She'd smiled at him, she'd wanted to learn how he did his trick with the soccer ball. He thought he was making friends with a pretty blonde and didn't know he was stepping in to make Johnny jealous or whatever it was Ali had been thinking. If she knew how Johnny was, knew that Johnny was so quick to snap or get jealous, had all that karate training then why'd she let him stumble forward like that? Let him make a fool of himself and get into a fight with Johnny?

Shouldn't she have grabbed his shoulders and said "Hey, we just met, this is my ex, we just broke up, he's a karate champion and I kind of dumped him without an explanation so like he wants to talk. Thanks for the lesson, welcome to town, I will be okay I've got a good right hook and Johnny wouldn't hurt me. But he would hurt you if you tried to go toe to toe with him."

Instead, she let Daniel think he was the knight in shining armor instead of a pawn, a random kid who didn't know what was happening and was just making everything worse.

When had this happened? When had he switched sides? When had he started to feel bad for Johnny Lawrence?

Right. After the match when all that bravado came crashing down and Daniel realized maybe what he thought was a glittering perfect life wasn't actually perfect. It just *looked* perfect. And maybe it was listening to Ali chatter next to him after the fight when they went out to celebrate about how cathartic it'd been to see Johnny Lawrence covered in his own damn blood for once because she hadn't seen him nearly die. She hadn't seen the way he didn't fight back as if he'd accepted that his life was over. That because he'd not been perfect and Kreese was pissed he'd just let everything end. She hadn't seen the marks around his neck. The lifelessness in his eyes. The way he bowed his head when he apologized, how his voice had rasped yet he pushed on despite how much it must've hurt to talk, to apologize to him, to Mr. Miyagi, to his mother.

And ever since the tournament the more he learned the less he understood about a lot of things, especially the girl sitting by his side, holding his hand and resting her head on his shoulder smelling like floral shampoo and perfume. He won the tournament, he got the girl, his enemies had been forced to recognize that he was a worthy opponent and yet he felt miserable. What he wanted was changing and he kept trying not to think about it.

He tilted his head and pressed his cheek against the top of Ali's head and breathed the way Mr. Miyagi had taught him, watching the movie, or trying. He didn't know how to proceed, he didn't know what to do. It felt like diffusing a bomb and after what Johnny and his mother had said he suddenly felt ill-equipped. What if he just made everything worse by prying? Maybe the best course forward was to talk to Mr. Miyagi. His advice always steered him the right way. Maybe he'd give him some ideas on how to move forward without bringing the life he'd won crashing down around his ears.

A Quiver in Brumation

Johnny was laying on his bed listening to music, tapping his foot to the beat. He could feel movement as someone opened the door but he couldn't be bothered. It was probably Bobby. Bobby didn't knock, Bobby and the cobras just showed up in his room. Sometimes with beer and weed, sometimes with cookies and baked goods. The former being Jimmy, the second being Dutch, the latter being Bobby. Tommy brought new music.

The vibrations weren't right for any cobra and he peeled his eyes open in the dark. The moon shone brightly through the windows and he saw Daniel carefully closing the door behind him and walking forward. Johnny sat up, taking the headphones off his head, the music seeping into the room.

Why was Daniel here? He'd already agreed to start going to school again and he had been. He hadn't been back to Mr. Miyagi's so he hadn't left anything else behind. They'd already taken care of his knee. He studied Daniel frantically suddenly worried that what he'd said before had come true, that someone had hurt him. But there weren't any bruises on his skin that Johnny could see, no scratches or cuts.

Daniel sat on the edge of the bed next to his hip, the bed dipping slightly by the weight. Sometimes the cobra's spent the night if they were too drunk to go home, or had been out or had gotten into a fight, sometimes with their parents. Johnny woke up with one of them on the other side of his bed snoring like a chainsaw smelling, like stale beer or weed or with red-rimmed eyes after a night of telling him how their parents just didn't get them. But they were always on the other side, plenty of space, totally platonic.

Daniel was in his space and he wondered if he needed to roll over, to scoot over and give him some more room. He didn't smell like beer. Johnny had never seen Daniel drink, but he also wasn't a kid who went to parties, which probably was Johnny's fault. He doubted Daniel had a fake ID. He didn't smell like weed.

Daniel pushed Johnny down, and Johnny didn't have a clue what was happening. A fight? They'd agreed to a truce. Though Daniel had tried to start a fight on the beach. Maybe this was that again. Was he pissed because of what he said earlier? Daniel wasn't saying anything and that was always so much worse.

"Daniel?" Johnny asked, wondering if he was waiting for the fake slap again. If he'd changed his mind about that.

He rose his hand to get it over with. Daniel grabbed his wrist and pinned it above Johnny's head and lunged forward kissing Johnny. His lips were soft and warm against his and it was better than Johnny would've guessed, assuming Daniel's experience was limited but who was Johnny to know what Daniel's life before California was. He nipped at Johnny's lower lip and then his tongue was in Johnny's mouth tasting warm and sweet as Daniel climbed on top of him pinning him to his bed, pressing his body close and Johnny forgot to breathe, heart racing.

Something rattled around in his subconscious and came loose.

This isn't real. It's a dream.

Daniel pulled away and looked at him with a big smile.

"Doesn't have to be," he said letting go of Johnny's wrist and leaning back to strip out of his shirt. "Why worry about that? We can have fun."

Definitely a dream. Johnny thought sitting up, a little dazed. Daniel's hands found his skin, fingers curling under his shirt and pulling it up, helping him out of it, kissing him again.

"Don't go," Daniel whispered into his neck, biting it determined to leave a bruise with his teeth, hands trailing down Johnny's stomach and inching slowly lower. Johnny knew where this was going and it was a dream. Daniel barely tolerated him, there was no way. Daniel moved to dispose of more clothing. Johnny took the opening and he rolled himself over and off the bed, hoping the fall would wake him.

His eyes flicked open and he jolted up. He looked at the dark ceiling of his room, hugging his blanket to his pounding chest. He cursed quietly. There was no Daniel and he didn't know what dreaming about Daniel meant. Maybe he was spending too much time with him. It wasn't like he hadn't dreamt about guys before. But never like a friend or whatever Daniel was.

There was some weight to his bed and Bobby was sleeping soundly next to him. He quickly escaped the bed and nearly tripped over Dutch who was sleeping on the floor. All of the cobras were there he realized, counting the bodies in the dark, and he was grateful he woke up first as he hurried to shower at the coldest possible setting because

he didn't want to explain what he'd been dreaming about to get him in his current state or who he'd been dreaming about. Especially he thought as he caught sight of himself in the mirror with how absolutely pink and red he was, but no mark on his neck. He wouldn't have been able to hide it. He sunk to the bottom of the shower and pulled his legs to his chest and ducked his head over his knees.

Dream Daniel was too much and he didn't want to return to him. He normally didn't go back to sleep to the same dream, but with his luck and a room full of sleeping cobras, he would of course fall asleep and find himself back under dream Daniel who'd laugh and say "Welcome back" before continuing where he left off and Johnny had an idea what would happen. It'd be embarrassing and he'd never live it down. Especially if he talked in his sleep. Or did worse. He rubbed his eyes, what was wrong with him? So Daniel had a sweet smile and could be kind and gentle when he wanted to be, could be reassuring, and also could kick him in the face and send him falling in the dirt. It didn't mean he wanted to... well what?

What did Johnny want, because maybe if he named it he could add it to the pile of things he'd never have and bury it away with all the other things. Like a normal happy family, a father figure who wasn't absolute shit, a lover. Is that what he wanted from Daniel? Of all the stupid things, he'd spent a semester fighting and being a dick to the boy, and what? Now he wanted his dick? There had to be some sort of messed-up psychological thing about this. Or was this new? Had he always liked Daniel? Had he not? Was it purely teenage hormones because he wasn't with Ali anymore and hadn't taken Dutch up on his offer to find some hot chicks and get laid to get his mind off of her?

That ache in his heart from Ali when he prodded it didn't hurt as much anymore. Which was curious. So maybe not. He did remember being furious with Daniel but that had changed. Maybe if he'd stopped himself from being such an asshole earlier, realized the garbage Kreese had been spewing earlier he wouldn't be in this mess. Or maybe he still would've.

He had to get his mind under control. He wished his Walkman was waterproof. The cold water was helping, it was shocking, he just had to get his mind off of Daniel, LaRusso. Maybe if he stopped calling him Daniel in his head the distance would help. LaRusso who took any space given. When Johnny retreated he followed, crowding him. Was that it? Was it because Daniel **Larusso** wouldn't leave him alone? Did he want to be left alone? *No.*

Johnny did not want to go to school tomorrow. He didn't want to leave his shower. *Think about something else Johnny, anything else.*

Cobras. His room was full of his friends and he hadn't woken up. When had he got so lax? When had they gotten so sneaky? Kreese would be proud. Bobby hadn't smelled of beer so they hadn't been out drinking. He hadn't smelled weed either. So why were they crashing at his place? Was that how they snuck in this time? Because they were quieter sober? Was it like how snakes huddle for warmth in winter? It was January, even if you could barely tell in California. He thought he saw that in a nature documentary, back when he started Cobra Kai and became obsessed with snakes because of Kreese, because of his karate.

He threw out his books when he'd finished talking to his Mom after the tournament. He'd thrown everything that reminded him of karate or Kreese in a box and donated it. Books on karate, snakes, strategy, fitness, the military, and Vietnam. He nearly threw out his trophies, nearly tore up pictures but didn't, it felt too much like something Sid would do and he couldn't. Instead he shoved them in the back of his closet so he wouldn't have to look at them anymore.

He leaned his head back against the tile, he was shivering. Misery did it he realized standing numbly. No way he was going back to sleep though, not worth the chance. He washed and dried off heading back into his dark room to dress. He found his Walkman on the side of the bed and listened to the music to drown out his friend's snores and laid back down. He wouldn't sleep. He'd just breathe and not think. Until the sun rose.

"Dude, did you sleep at all?" Bobby asked.

Johnny cracked an eye open and looked up at Bobby who was pulling the headphone from Johnny's ear.

"Through a room full of snoring guys? No," Johnny said.

The sun was up, filling his room with warmth. The boys were up and moving, stretching and grumbling.

"It's unfair that Bobby always gets the bed," Jimmy complained.

"You always lose rock paper scissors," Bobby said.

"The fact you always *win* rock paper scissors is suspicious," Tommy said.

"Why are you here? We've got school," Johnny said pushing himself up. He was already dressed just had to brush his hair.

"Do we really got to be nice to LaRusso?" Dutch asked, his voice a whine.

Johnny froze and turned slowly to Dutch. "What did you do?"

"We went to the movies," Bobby said. "Saw that new comedy."

"And LaRusso and Ali were there," Jimmy said.

"So I started throwing popcorn at LaRusso and Bobby gave me shit for it," Dutch said kicking the leg of Johnny's chair. "I throw popcorn and snacks at people all the fucking time. I mean it's how you landed Ali in the first place. But Bobby had to be a wuss about it."

"Leave him alone okay?" Johnny said. His hands were in tight fists and he carefully had to remind himself to unclench his fists, to loosen his jaw.

"What are we going to do then?" Dutch asked, rolling around in Johnny's chair. "It's so boring. Can't bother LaRusso, can't heckle Ali, can't do karate. What else is there to do in this damn place but get wasted and high? Is that all we're going to do until we graduate? What a fucking waste."

"Could get laid," Tommy suggested.

Dutch burst out laughing and motioned to himself and everyone but Johnny. "*We* could get laid, but in case you forgot Ali is like queen bee at school. The other girls aren't going to touch Johnny unless they've got a death wish for their social life. Even if they're over there's this stupid unsaid rule about going after some girls ex or some other bullshit. Girl code or whatever. So he's out of luck unless Johnny's willing to go for some dick instead."

The stuff that came out of Dutch's mouth never surprised Johnny. He was so used to it that he'd learned how to school his features long ago. But this hit like a ton of bricks and Johnny felt his skin burn. He remembered dream Daniel pinning him to the bed to kiss him and how nice it'd seemed. He felt his heart pound in his ears. He knew he was screwed. He knew what he should've said, what he should've done. He should've laughed it off and said something about fish in the sea and how there were other schools in the Valley and he just had to cast a wider net. But he remembered Daniel's tongue and hands, hands

he'd felt on him multiple times because the boy couldn't keep his hands to himself. And he'd been so good trying to bury that dream and the fountain of feelings he'd tried to plug up.

He wished they were all drunk or that it was nighttime or they were high or something else, but in the harsh morning light he couldn't hide and he knew he was the color of a tomato by the heat on his skin.

"Fuck," Dutch said eyes wide unable to take them off of Johnny.

"Dutch," Bobby said, warning in his voice that held an edge. If this all went south Johnny knew he'd still be okay. He might have to grab his bonsai and Avanti and bolt if Dutch made a big enough scene that Sid found out. But Bobby would have his back. And Johnny was faster than any of them.

Dutch threw up his hands, eyes turning to Bobby, "Shit man, is that why you always get the bed? You two dating or something?"

Bobby shook his head, the atmosphere of the room was heavy and Johnny felt sick. He should've never left the shower. Getting up was a mistake. Coming home was a mistake. He was looking at the bonsai mapping out his escape from the room when he felt a hand fall heavily on his shoulder and he flinched. The hand pulled away quickly and he looked at his friends. He wondered again if a teenager could have a heart attack.

"Who is it?" Dutch asked.

"What?" Johnny managed.

"Which guy at school do you have your eye on?"

"Dutch," Bobby said, his voice practically a growl and Dutch shrunk back.

Dutch had no self-control, no impulse control. He was great for fun, at parties, but he was wild. Down for practically anything.

When they'd all first met, Bobby had been the number one student at the dojo under Kreese but he didn't follow through with Kreese's decree to make sure the opponent didn't get up again. Kreese said "End it" or "Finish it" and Bobby always hesitated. Except for one day after class when Dutch had dropped a word Johnny hadn't really understood. He'd heard it once from a British guy visiting and chatting

with Sid, it was a cigarette or like slang for one or something. But Bobby had grabbed Dutch by the front of his shirt and told him never to say that word again and Dutch being Dutch had laughed because what was Bobby going to do? He spat the word out at Bobby and Bobby beat the shit out of him. **Bobby ended it.** Kreese would've been proud. Dutch never messed with Bobby again. Bobby told him to stop something in that tone and he did. Bobby only gave so many warnings.

"We're going to be late," Tommy said glancing at the clock.

Johnny would've rather the earth swallowed him whole.

"How about we ditch?" Dutch suggested. "I mean Johnny already threw out his perfect attendance by just locking himself in his room. He's clearly miserable. We haven't done any fun shit since the tournament."

Johnny looked at Dutch with surprise. Dutch wasn't usually this chill about anything.

"Oh c'mon," Dutch said. "Do you seriously want to go to school Johnny?"

"No," Johnny mumbled.

He didn't want to see Daniel. He didn't think he could face him. He needed more time to evict Dream Daniel from his subconcious.

"Then let's go do something fun. We need it. It's not like school's really going to care. We're fucking seniors. Unless we do something stupid and get arrested we're fine. Live a little."

They all looked at each other than at Johnny. Johnny always said no when they recommended ditching school. He always said they could but he wouldn't join them. They did sometimes, but they'd slink back and complain how it wasn't the same without him, he assumed it was because they wanted to be in the Avanti. He had the best car in the group. No Johnny meant no Avanti. He groaned and put his head in his hands.

"Fine, this once, fine."

It seemed like a bad idea. He'd shown his hand without meaning too. He'd promised himself no one would ever know except Bobby and his mother. He'd never tell the guys or let them know because he didn't

think they'd stay his friends. He didn't think they'd accept it.

Johnny carefully picked up his jacket and slipped it over his shoulders and picked up the bonsai and headed out to the Avanti.

He had nightmares about it sometimes. Kissing some dude whose face he couldn't make out only for them to find him and never talk to him again, pretend he didn't exist. They'd mention it to someone else and then Sid would find out. And Sid would never let him in the house again, locking his mother in like some princess in a fairytale. Only Johnny wasn't a knight or a prince who could rescue her.

He hadn't expected this reaction and he waited patiently for the other shoe to drop. He had his bonsai, he was going to his car. His Walkman was safely tucked into his pocket. If he had to bolt he was fine. He'd be okay.

They settled into his car and with the bonsai safely in his lap, he drove. They chattered around him in a comfortable way. He knew Bobby was watching them like a hawk. Or maybe it was a secretary bird, the bird that stomped the shit out snakes heads and brained them or something. Bobby was ready to do that and it made Johnny relax, seeing that tension in Bobby's shoulders.

Bobby had been the first one he'd told. Told him before his mother.

He'd cornered Bobby when they were alone and asked. "Are we best friends?"

"Of course," Bobby said looking confused.

"Forever?"

Johnny remembered feeling like if Kreese or anyone else heard him ask that, with mushy gushy friendship bullshit, he'd be made fun of to the moon and back. But before Cobra Kai Johnny hadn't had any friends.

"Yeah," Bobby said slowly with a look like *am I going to have to help you bury a dead body?*

"Even if I'm an annoying little shit? Even if I do something stupid? Even if I hurt someone? Even if I'm destined to die in a ditch somewhere? Even if I'm worthless? No matter what?"

It'd been all the stuff Sid said, all the stuff Sid believed. Bobby had

frowned deeply and just nodded. It was enough.

"Then I have a question."

Bobby nodded and they sat. Bobby waited patiently for the question to come and Johnny struggled to ask it, to get over that one hump. Bobby had never lied to him, but the only unconditional love he had in his life was from his Mom and sometimes he worried it was conditional. That one day he'd fuck up so badly it'd be over.

"You know how sometimes you dream of a chick and the dream is super hot and it affects you?"

"Yeah," Bobby said.

"Do you...Do you ever also feel that way about guys?" Johnny whispered forcing himself to look at Bobby.

Health class had never covered it . Only the stuff with girls. Guys weren't mentioned with other guys so he'd held off asking. But he kept dreaming about both. The guys were faceless, or at least he couldn't hold onto any specific feature most of the time. Except that he liked them and liked whatever was happening. Sometimes it was some character from a movie or a tv show he liked, then they had faces and there was usually a story in there somewhere. Like he'd be a part of the movie and then suddenly the hero and he were making out because they'd saved the world or some other sappy romantic bullshit.

Bobby shook his head but smiled gently. "I don't, but it's fine Johnny. My uncle does. He's lived with his best friend since college for decades. They had a ceremony when I was a kid. They're married, but like not officially you know? Like not in the government's eyes but like in our family I've got two uncles who love each other so much, just like my parents love each other or you know anyone else."

Johnny nodded thoughtfully. He didn't fully understand that but he'd seen how Bobby's parents interacted. Sickly sweet around each other, lots of soft looks, gentle touches, and kisses. Always helping each other, listening to what the other said, remembering things about each other, just knowing.

"I don't know how other people would take it though," Bobby said softly, gently putting his hand on Johnny's arm. "You got to be careful who you talk to about stuff like this. My uncle said people try to beat the shit out of him when they find out. It's why he learned karate. He's the reason I do karate. He said it makes him feel safer."

Johnny had thought about that. It wasn't like he was going to talk about it to Sid, but he'd thought about asking Kreese and now he was glad he hadn't. Kreese didn't go in for those kinds of heart to hearts.

Johnny drove them towards a park. There was a section of the park that they used to hang out at after class, drinking soda or beer, whatever Jimmy got his hands on and it'd been the first place Johnny had smoked weed. Dutch had brought it and passed it around and they'd talked all night long. Johnny didn't think he'd ever talked so much.

He parked the Avanti and the guys spilled out of the car setting up camp. Johnny kept stuff in the trunk in case he needed to make a run for it. He'd never explained to them why. They just teased him and asked if he was a boy scout or something. Now it came in handy. Johnny sat on a picnic bench and set his bonsai gently on the table in a spot where it could get some sun and then laid down. He pulled his hood up from under his jacket and over his head and shut his eyes. Maybe here he could catch some more sleep and because it was a different space, a space Daniel hadn't been, he wouldn't be haunted by him. Before sleep even had the courtesy of knocking he heard the guys talking quietly.

"How long have you known?" It was Dutch.

"What's it matter?" Bobby sounded bitter.

"Is this why you beat the shit out of me?"

"No, but you deserved it."

"Guys come on," Tommy was trying to placate the two.

"Why are we even here Dutch?" Bobby hissed, "What's your big plan? Huh? Whatever your planning you better stay in line or I'll-"

"Calm your ass down," Dutch said. "You think I'd really do something to Johnny? What because he also likes dudes? Or only likes dudes? Whatever. Why are you on my case so bad?"

"Because you didn't do shit."

"What does *that* mean?"

"The rest of us tried to help Johnny when Kreese tried to kill him and *you didn't do shit*."

"I don't know if you realized this but you're pawing and pleading didn't do him or yourself much good either. None of us could've saved him. We thought ourselves some damn hot shots and Kreese swatted you all away like flies. *Even you Bobby*. What did you want me to do? I couldn't ever beat you in a fight when you put your all in, I couldn't ever beat Johnny. Kreese knocked you down *while* choking Johnny. What could I have done? Yeah, that little old guy made it look easy, but I panicked alright? I froze."

"You think that's why he flinched?" Jimmy asked quietly.

"Hell should I know?" Dutch said. "Probably. Bobby, I get it. You're fucking protective of Johnny. We all know he's been through shit, it's why we gave LaRusso hell. Because what Ali did, no matter how much I joke about it wasn't fucking fair. What Kreese did wasn't fucking fair. What Sid makes the damn staff say whenever you ask to see Johnny is so fucking messed up. You're not the only one who gives a damn."

"We feel like shit too," Tommy said. "Not being able to help him."

"If he likes dudes so what?" Jimmy said. "He's still *our* Johnny."

Tears pricked at Johnny's eyes but he didn't move. They probably thought he was listening to his Walkman like usual.

"So who does he like?" Dutch pressed.

"I don't think I should say," Bobby said.

Johnny frowned. He hadn't told Bobby anything. He'd *just* realized he liked Daniel. What, did Johnny moan Daniel's name in his sleep or something embarrassing like that? Bobby had been sleeping right next to him after all. Just kill him now if he'd done that. Put him out of his misery.

"Dude, come on. We all know we fucked up. That tournament was a nightmare and there was shit we could do for Johnny and we failed. But if there's some dude he's got his eyes on *that* we can do. We can be wingmen or something like that. Like the way we were with Ali. Let us help him get the guy," Dutch sounded way more enthused than Johnny thought possible. "Or if the guy isn't into that, find him another better guy. We need a clue, to figure out his type."

Bobby huffed, he was caving and Johnny thought about sitting up and telling them all to shut up and mind their own damn business. But he waited, heart pounding in his ears.

"He's spending a lot of time with Daniel," Bobby said carefully. "And like Johnny hasn't said he likes Daniel but like he came home with scratches on his thigh."

Johnny heard the movement in the grass. Bobby was showing them where the damn scratch marks were on his own leg as an example. He'd worn pants because Bobby had made such a stupid big deal over it.

"Shit who scratches someone there?" Tommy asked.

"Well, Daniel came to visit. I ran into him outside of the house so I showed him how to sneak in because..."

"Because of Sid's rule with the staff ," Jimmy said.

"Yeah, and well they were talking and I swear I couldn't tell whether they were flirting or fighting. And so I asked Johnny after Daniel left and he told me he was taking Daniel to the doctor to get his knee checked out."

"So what?" Dutch said, unimpressed.

"*So*, when I asked he turned bright red like before. Like this morning. Like I'd gotten it right. I mean I haven't seen him flirt with any other dude or stare at them longingly or whatever. But he's been bending over backwards for Daniel after the tournament. And I thought at first it was guilt, but like I saw the way Johnny was looking at Daniel and it's not the same way he used to. It's like...like how he looked at Ali."

Oh god. Was Johnny that obvious? Did he have a look? Had it been all over his face before he even realized his own feelings? Just out there in the open the way Bobby had said. He might as well have just stood around naked.

"Daniel LaRusso?" Dutch said incredulously. "That little shit? The one who wouldn't leave Johnny alone? Of all the boys in our school. Of all the guys in the Valley. The one that kicks him in the fucking face is the one he likes?"

"I think so," Bobby said softly.

Dutch made a thoughtful sound. It was quiet. Too quiet. He could hear the wind in the trees, some bugs buzzing about somewhere, a bird chirping.

"Daniel's funny in class," Tommy offered.

"He stands out," Jimmy agreed.

Dutch burst out laughing. "He likes short feisty ones huh? Is that it? That's his type? I mean didn't Ali also punch him?"

Bury him now. Just do it while he was still alive. Get it over with.

Ali had punched him when he'd kissed her to make Daniel jealous. It wasn't the same. It hadn't made him like her more. He'd felt a spark of comfort from it, that she could handle herself if someone bothered her. It'd been a good punch. Daniel though sucker-punched him first. He didn't get punched in the face with love. Oh shit, love. No, definitely he wasn't in love with anyone anymore. Like, scale it back to like. Like was becoming manageable. Love was a different ball park that he didn't think he was allowed to play in. But like, that he could watch from a distance.

He didn't have a type. The first guy he'd made out with had been a lifeguard he'd met before Ali. He hadn't punched Johnny. They'd just flirted and then they'd made out on his break for the two weeks he'd been in town covering for a friend.

"Would Daniel even...go for Johnny?" Jimmy asked softly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dutch asked voice full of threat. "He'd be lucky to have Johnny."

"We made his life hell. He's not like some other dude at school whose known Johnny for years. He's only seen our bad side. All of us. If we were wingmen we'd probably make it worse."

"Bobby said they were flirting," Dutch said, annoyed.

"He *thought* they were flirting," Tommy clarified. "Or fighting and a scratched up thigh could mean anything."

"How the hell do you get scratched there if it's not flirting? Dude's don't scratch each other when they're fighting. Pretty sure we all saw Daniel fight. He doesn't scratch," Dutch said.

"Yeah, I can't figure it out," Bobby said. "Johnny didn't want to talk about it."

"Then let's ask him," Dutch said.

Johnny's heart tried to bolt out of his chest. He could hear footsteps, the sound of grass beneath shoes, then onto the dirt towards Johnny. He couldn't fake it anymore and he sat up with a frown.

"Piss off," Johnny said.

Dutch laughed sinking into the seat next to him like he wasn't scared of the look on Johnny's face.

"Dude, are you and Daniel doing it?"

"No!" Johnny said.

He meant it to come out firm but it tripped on the way out. He felt his cheeks burn. The rest of the group came in and crowded around the picnic table.

"But you want to?" Tommy pressed.

Johnny tried to remember if they'd been this annoying about Ali. He was pretty sure they hadn't. Dutch had thrown candy at her, she punched him, and then chatted with Johnny about the movie. The next thing he knew he was asking her out and she'd agreed and they'd continued that for two years. It'd been so damn easy. This *wasn't* easy. This was torture. His friends were torturing him. He looked away from them, gently pulling the bonsai closer. His eyes shot up and he turned to Bobby, eyes narrow and frowning.

"How the hell did you know? Is my face seriously that obvious? I didn't even put it together until like this morning."

Bobby looked a little startled and then burst out laughing and if Johnny didn't love the damn bonsai he would've chucked it at Bobby's head.

"So you *do* like Daniel!" Jimmy said, eyes wide and Johnny retreated into looking at the bonsai like the leaves were the most interesting thing he'd seen in his life.

"How'd you get the scratch? Is that why you're wearing pants despite it being like over 90 degrees out?" Dutch asked tugging on the side of

Johnny's pants. Johnny slapped his hand away.

"You wanna die?" Johnny growled.

Dutch laughed, "Seriously Johnny."

"It was an accident okay?" Johnny said. "It's not a big deal like you're all making it out to be. He was driving and missed the stick shift and I'd said something to piss him off and instead of getting the stick he got my leg."

"Wait, now I've got like a million more questions," Bobby said leaning forward. "So you weren't in the Avanti. Where the hell were you? What were you doing? How'd does someone miss the stick shift by that much? Are you sure it wasn't on purpose?"

"Like a sexy scratch?" Dutch asked with another laugh.

Johnny stomped his foot down on Dutch's foot.

"I went with him and his sensei to the beach. I'm like helping around the house or whatever, fixing stuff. As like...thanks," Johnny said softly, voice dropping to a whisper, eyes on the tree. "And so he invited me to the beach because of some balance thing he makes Daniel do or whatever. But we took his truck and somehow I got stuck in the middle with the...the stick...you know."

"I couldn't scheme something up better myself," Dutch said howling with laughter, getting up quickly before Johnny could swipe at him and holding his stomach as he laughed. "Dude are you sure this wasn't done on purpose? Sticking you in the middle so Daniel will flirt with you every time he had to shift gears?"

Johnny flushed bright red. "It wasn't like that. There just wasn't a ton of space. Daniel's with Ali you numbskull. He's not fucking flirting with me. I'm on this stupid ride by myself."

He buried his head in his hands.

Of course, he'd like the guy his ex-girlfriend decided to date. Of course, he'd make things an even bigger mess than they already were.

"Dude, fuck Ali," Jimmy said, earning a shove from Tommy. "She just dropped you without explanation. If you like Daniel steal him from her."

Johnny flung his hands out from where they'd dug into his hair and onto the table, it probably was sticking up now.

"Did you all forget that we were massive dicks to Daniel? That we beat the shit out of him? Made his life miserable? Fucked up his knee? You really think the fucking mountain of screw-ups is so easy to fucking ignore?"

"Is his leg really that messed up?" Bobby asked eyes wide.

"No. I mean, he's got to rest. The doctor gave him crutches and meds and stuff. But if he stays off of it and elevates or something like that for months he'll be fine. I think. He's not going to be in gym or sports for the rest of the year," Johnny said softly, knowing that pain of regret and fear in Bobby's eyes as he'd seen it in his own.

"Then fine, we hoist the boy around like a fucking king. We change gears," Dutch said slipping back into the seat next to Johnny and tapping his finger against the table. "Instead of destroying his senior year, we make it the fucking best."

"And how do you recommend we do that?" Johnny asked.

"Well, you've got him outside of school right? Like you're what was it? Community servicing your way out of your guilt or some other bullshit?" Dutch said waving him off. "So you're getting close to him there. Well, we've got lunches, classes, field trips, prom, and all sorts of other school shit where we can do a one-eighty and make him realize we're not so bad and if we're not so bad and he's seeing you be this nice guy outside of school then maybe..."

"Maybe what? He'll break up with Ali and date me? *I* didn't want to break up with Ali."

"Maybe we could get her to dump him?" Tommy recommended. "Get her to date someone else?"

"You offering up your services there bucko?" Bobby asked with a grin. "She hates *all of us* if you forgot."

"I don't think Daniel would appreciate meddling."

Dutch reached over and gave his bicep a squeeze. "Dude, all the girls fell over themselves for these muscles before Ali." He quickly ducked out of the way as Johnny swung at him. "If you just show off how hot you are then maybe he'll melt into your arms."

"I don't think that's how this works," Johnny said with a frown.

"The girls do talk about you a lot," Tommy said with a sigh. "They complain that Ali put you on a damn blacklist for the dating pool and say it's such a waste because you're hot. Like across the board man. I'm sure you could work that for a guy."

"Not just a guy, *Daniel*. How do you guys keep forgetting how messed up it is?" Johnny said stiffly.

How were they just going along with it like it was normal, like it was just the most basic thing, that, of course, Johnny Lawrence had a thing for Daniel and Daniel just needed what, some old-fashioned flirting to pick him over Ali? Or the stupid cartoonish posing some of the guys did on the beach to try and get girls? It made his stomach sour at the thought. He didn't want to hurt Ali. He didn't want to hurt Daniel. There was no way to try and win Daniel over without hurting one or both of them. And the elephant in the room, the bullying, and the fighting was the size of Mt Everest and the guys were ignoring it like it was just a chess piece they hadn't figure out how to move into position yet.

"I don't want you guys meddling okay? I don't think Daniel would date me if I was the last person on earth and I wouldn't blame him after all the hell I put him through. So just drop it. I appreciate the support but, it's not going to happen. Seriously. Daniel's with Ali. Just let me do my penance in peace."

"Johnny," Bobby said in that tone, the tone that was all soft and full of concern.

Johnny wished he had a beer. He wouldn't drive the Avanti with a beer but he didn't have to go anywhere. He could just lay down in that tent and not move. Especially because that tone was making tears well up in his eyes and he'd be damned before he cried in front of the guys over this.

"It's not even worth getting all worked up about, it's never going to happen. The only reason Daniel is suffering my company is because of his sensei, because Mr. Miyagi is...possibly the nicest person I've ever met and is humoring me."

The guys were silent for a while and Johnny wondered if he'd said too much. He didn't talk about this kind of stuff with them. With Bobby sometimes when he felt desperate, they were best friends. But he rarely shared when he was hurting unless he felt like he was going to

burst. And he didn't feel like that. He just felt empty and tired. Tired of fucking up, of making stupid choices, of putting all of his faith in the wrong people.

Kreese wouldn't ever do half the stuff Mr. Miyagi did. Johnny had trained with him for years and had never seen his house or apartment or wherever the hell he lived, had never eaten a meal with the man. The idea of Kreese cooking for his students was so outrageous Johnny nearly laughed. He'd never given Johnny a gift like the bonsai. Never trusted him to drive him somewhere.

Dutch let out a groan and slammed his head into the picnic table. "Fuck." he cursed.

Startled Johnny scooped up his bonsai because it'd bounced from the vibration and stared at Dutch. Dutch rolled his head slightly and looked up at Johnny out of the corner of his eye. It was a dark look, one normally that meant a fight was brewing and Johnny tensed.

"I'll meet you halfway," Dutch said. "I won't tell Daniel you want to kiss him or do the naked horizontal tango or whatever, however it works between two dudes. I won't bully him. But I'm not going to not hype you up. Because this is going to drive me nuts," he motioned awkwardly at Johnny. "Because everything is fucked up and it all came crashing down around your ears, you're the one who took all the damage. We just, what don't have a dojo to go to anymore? Fine. I can study something else. There are like three other martial arts places near me that I can walk to from my house or bike to. I could do capoeira or muay Thai or jujitsu to deal with all my energy. Karate was just a cool thing to learn where I made friends. I liked the stupid logo. But I'm not like great at it. I didn't win trophies and I wasn't sensei's favorite or whatever. It wasn't like I was still going to do it after we graduated. I mean you all would probably go off to college and I'm not going to be the oldest person in the damn class left behind. But I know myself and I know I need some sort of structure that those classes offered. Something to do so I'm not just getting high out of my gourd and end up passed out in a cemetery or something stupid. Yeah okay, we were dicks to Daniel. We were dicks to a lot of people. Kreese encouraged it. Pitted us against the new kids who showed up at the dojo and had us beat the shit out of them to weed out the weak ones and when that's what you're constantly told to do it fucks you up. It carries into all parts of your life outside of the dojo. We're all recovering from that. Or at least I think we are. I am. Johnny, you clearly are grappling with it. But like hell am I going to let you spend the rest of senior year self-flagellating and don't you

dare say some mopey bullshit about how you're not worth it or whatever. I'm being selfish as shit. We've got a semester left, supposed to be the highlight of our time at school. This isn't like freshman year or something. I'm going to go out with a bang and you're joining even if I have to drag your pathetic depressed ass with me. Hell be our stupid ass 9th wheel or whatever while we go out and get babes. But even if Cobra Kai is dead we're still cobra's for life. We're still fucking friends and I'm not going to let you just drown because you don't want to lift your head up out of the water because Johnny boy you're standing in the shallows and if you just fucking walk out of the water or take our damn offered hands we can get you back up on your feet." Dutch sounded pissed and he was glaring at Johnny, he rolled his head back and closed his eyes breathing into the picnic table. "Dumbass," he muttered.

Johnny just stared at him. Dutch wasn't going to let this go. He was stubborn. They all were. It was the best he could hope out of them. He looked away, out at the trees where a house finch was chirping, blinking hard.

"Fine," he said.

It's not like he could stop Dutch from interacting with Daniel. And it's not like he wanted to ruin the rest of the their senior year. It was a big deal. Dutch was right. College was around the corner after summer was over, what then? It wasn't like they were all going to go together or something like that. Dutch had been adamant he'd do trade school or work once he graduated high school. Bobby, Jimmy, and Tommy were off to college and Johnny didn't know what he wanted to do. He felt directionless, lost. He might regret it, but he also knew that this was Dutch trying. They were all trying and it was more than Johnny had ever dared hope.

Closing In

Daniel noticed Johnny wasn't around almost immediately. The Avanti wasn't in the parking lot at school. He had half a mind to leave and drive to Johnny's house and drag him to school. But what if he wasn't home? What if it was something Daniel had said? What if his Mom was right and he'd overreacted and been rude and now Johnny didn't want to see him again? Johnny was trying. Why couldn't Daniel? Why did Daniel always misunderstand Johnny in the worst way possible? Ali's arm hooked in his in the hall and he smiled at her.

"Finish your science report?" he asked.

"I did. Hey what are you going to do after school?" she asked while they walked down the hall together. No cobras he noticed.

"Go home?"

"No, I mean after we graduate."

"I don't know," he said.

His Ma and Mr. Miyagi expected him to go to college but he didn't really want to. School had been hell, why continue it? But he couldn't break that to them. It'd break their hearts.

"What about you?"

"I want to be a doctor," Ali said with a smile all warm and sparkly and there was excitement in her eyes.

"Dr. Mills, has a nice ring to it," Daniel said.

It did. He could see her being a doctor. She'd be great at it. She was smart, pretty, witty.

She laughed, delighted. "Right? It's a lot of school though. I'm going to be in school forever."

"Good thing you're good at it," Daniel said.

It was also going to be expensive. But Ali's family could afford it. Daniel's family couldn't. His parents had saved up a lot for him to have a college fund and that was for a *small* college fund. He'd still have to take out loans and try for scholarships and it was just too

much of a headache.

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek before leaving to go to her class. And Daniel put his hand up to his cheek. He liked Ali. He really did. But something had changed. For a moment he thought, *maybe we should just be friends.* Maybe that would be better. But that seemed ridiculous. He spent a semester getting into fights because he'd tried to win her over, to go on dates with her, and then... and then what? He realized maybe it wasn't what he wanted at all? Johnny would be so pissed.

At lunch, Ali was chewing her lip nervously again. She had noticed there weren't any cobras at school either. No Johnny.

"I guess once you start skipping you just don't have to stop," she said with a laugh but it didn't reach her eyes. It was awkward.

"You're worried about him," Daniel said.

"No! Of course not!"

"You dated for two years."

She blinked at him. "I didn't tell you that."

"Yeah," Daniel said softly. "You didn't."

"Then how? Johnny told you?" Ali whispered, gripping her tray tightly between her fingers.

"Yeah," Daniel said. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you stop me from getting in between you two?"

Ali's eyes narrowed, "Between us? There wasn't anything still going on between us. We broke up."

"Yeah but, everyone else knew. I didn't know. I-I thought he was going to hurt you, you know. It's why I got between you two. Why I started the fight. I thought I was helping protect you. I didn't realize, I mean you didn't mention he did karate, that he was good at it. Like really good at it. You let me-you let me fight him on your behalf blindly."

Ali was frowning deeply. "I didn't *let you* fight him on behalf. You put yourself between us anyway. I didn't *make you* do anything. I never make you do anything. You're the one who always misinterprets everything. You're the one who thought I was just using you to make

Johnny jealous, who got upset because you thought I cared about stupid stuff like the fact you didn't have a car and your Mom drove us on our date, or who thought I wanted Johnny to kiss me. You always take things the wrong way and run rather than face your problems. So what the hell Daniel?"

Daniel frowned, she was right. "I just, I don't get it."

She laughed and it wasn't a kind laugh. There was an edge to it. "You saw how Johnny was. Why would I want to be with him? Why do you care? Like he beat the shit out of you multiple times. Who would want to be with a guy like that?"

"He's apologized, he's making amends, he's being nice," Daniel protested. "Sure his karate stuff was bad, but he doesn't go to that dojo anymore. He gave it up."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah," Daniel said softly, he didn't add that Johnny probably couldn't go back if he wanted.

"Huh," Ali said.

And Daniel wondered again if he fucked up. If telling Ali these things was giving her a one-way ticket out of their relationship and sending her back to Johnny like some weird party game. Or if he was doing it on purpose so she would.

"Listen," she said after a while of staring at her lunch and then back at Daniel. "Johnny is, he can be...cool. But I don't know what you want from me Daniel." She reached out and took his hand in hers and brushed her thumb over the back of his hand. "We're together now. Who cares that Johnny and I dated for two years? Who cares if he's mending his ways? He's not hurting you? That's great. You guys become friends? Weird but fine. It's better than you getting beaten. But when I make my mind up about something that's it. Done. So like, stop worrying. I'm not going back to Johnny."

Daniel wanted to protest that that wasn't true. He'd talked to her and wore her down into forgiving him and she came back to him. But he didn't feel like pointing it out. It somehow felt like it'd make everything worse. But he also didn't agree with the conclusion she'd drawn. It made him feel like an insecure boyfriend. Was he? He didn't feel like Johnny was out to get Ali anymore. He believed Johnny. But he didn't trust that Ali would stick with him and he wasn't sure if he

wanted her to. He felt like he should've cared a lot more. He flipped his hand over and gave hers a gentle squeeze.

"It's just weird that they're not here, like all of them, is all," he said softly.

She smiled. "Yeah, it's like too quiet. But we should enjoy it. Wherever they are there's bound to be some chaos and I feel bad for whoever's with them." She laughed and it was full of mirth and Daniel smiled softly but didn't feel it.

The next day in gym class Daniel was sitting on the bleachers. Even though he couldn't participate and the teacher gave him shit for it, the note was non-negotiable. Dr. Fletcher had put an official seal or something on her forms so it wasn't something kids could forge. The cobras were back, Johnny among their ranks. Daniel kept watching them. The way they'd say something and burst into laughter and Johnny would push them away, swat at them. Johnny fought their familiarity, their advances into his space and that made his stomach twist up in knots.

Johnny didn't shove him off, didn't push him away when he got close. Johnny just let Daniel do whatever and part of him wondered how far that went. Was it because he felt safe because Daniel didn't practice cobra kai? He didn't strike first? So he thought Daniel wouldn't attack him? He'd offered to let Daniel beat the shit out of him, just laid there under him with a look of defeat, hair in the sand, beautiful in the sunlight. Damnit. Every time.

He heard the whistle and jumped. The teacher was yelling at someone and they came jogging over. He recognized Dutch who glanced at him with a look that spelled danger. Daniel wondered if he could run. Out of all the cobras, Dutch seemed the most out of control, the one more likely to egg Johnny on, to continue to torment him despite the ceasefire. But here he was grabbing a water bottle and out of the whole bench, out of the whole set of bleachers, was plopping down next to Daniel.

Being in the same gym class with Dutch was hell. The boy took everything as a chance to trip Daniel, elbow him, kick him, punch him. Bad sportsmanship all the way around. Whatever he could get away with. He wanted to move but it felt like any sudden movements would send Dutch on the attack. So he stayed put and focused on the

game, eyes on the teacher, praying he'd keep an eye on them.

"What do you want?" Daniel asked after Dutch finished chugging his water and let out a satisfied breath of air.

"I suppose I should start with sorry for being a shit," Dutch said and Daniel turned to look at him surprised.

At this point, all of the cobras had apologized. Tommy and Jimmy had said it in the classes they shared, Bobby had said it at Johnny's house and Johnny was constantly saying it. He never expected Dutch to say it. The last time he'd seen Dutch Dutch was flipping him off.

Dutch leaned back, arms against the seats behind him, body relaxed and open. "You gotta know the dojo was like our life right? Like before that we weren't friends, hell we didn't even know Johnny before the dojo. Didn't go to the same school, nothin'." Dutch was watching the game. "And Kreese, man, sensei, he was like the toughest motherfucker I'd ever seen. Didn't take shit. Everything he said hit here." Dutch's hand thumped his chest over his heart. "About how life isn't fair, not some kid cartoon crap where the good guys win, but it's actually a shit show and if someone comes after you you got to make a stand, you gotta put a stop to it because otherwise they'll come back and stab you when your backs turned. It's why he had that credo or whatever, strike first before they do so you've got the element of surprise but he also meant that for dating and like life you know? Be the first one to sign up for the shit you want, see a babe you like get to her before anyone else does, don't just sit on your hands and do nothing. You gotta move. Strike hard, don't do anything half-assed, keep your opponent down. You pull your punches and guess what the dude gets up and stabs you. You wanna do something you put your whole self into it otherwise what's the point? If you fail because you didn't put your all into it, well that's on you but if you fail because you did your best and did everything... well Kreese would say there's no failure allowed, but you can still be proud of your effort, right? And No mercy because some fucker will be pissed if you went all the way through those first two and then suddenly stepped back and then they'll get revenge. Some eye for an eye bullshit. So you gotta teach the bastard a lesson. It's what? The whole opposite of your own karate right? Yeah, it's dark as fuck. But it felt like Kreese actually cared you know? In his own fucked up way and wanted us to be badasses who would survive out in the real world when shit hit the fan. And when you feel like you're life is pretty awful already you take that shit to heart."

Daniel watched him. Dutch wasn't looking at him, just talking. And then Dutch's eyes slid over to Daniels and Daniel wondered if he could run. Seeming to sense this Dutch turned back to the game.

"I get some of it man. But the no mercy one always stuck wrong. Bobby never could get over it. Except like once. But if the first two make so much damn sense then why shouldn't the last one? We trusted Kreese. All of us. But most of all Johnny. Johnny's had it rough. He doesn't talk about it but he also can't hide from it. You've been to his house. Sid makes it as unwelcoming as possible. You come to my house or Jimmy's, Bobby's or Tommy's and it's a fucking house. Some parent welcoming you with a smile, some fucking cookies or some other bullshit somewhere to be had. I mean yeah Jimmy's got like three houses, a summer house on a lake, this stupid expensive lodge out in the mountains, and then the mansion in Encino but it's like night and day compared to that bullshit Johnny lives in, like the worlds crappiest Cinderella story. Hell Bobby's parents practically tucked us all in the first time we spent the night over and Johnny looked like he'd been stricken from an adult he didn't know showing him kindness that like we all realized that something was seriously wrong and vowed his fights were our fights and even if he could kick our asses into the ground we'd still help him up when he fell down because when Johnny's your friend he's all in. When he's on your team he puts his all into it. Hell, it was like he was so damned starved for something positive in his damn life that Kreese showed him the tiniest bit of praise and he climbed up the ranks so fast." Dutch sighed closing his eyes and hanging his head back. "To watch him fall like that and be unable to do anything. To see he'd still placed, better than the rest of us, to expect Kreese to clap him on the back and say you'll get them next time, like any other adult or any other normal person should've done and then to see him do that instead? To push him the rest of the way down. It's fucked up. Like what's your life man? So your Mom drove you on your date with Ali? So what? Your Mom cared to do that. Sid wouldn't have let Johnny's Mom do that. Bobby fucked up your knee? Your sensei rushed to your side kneeling beside you full of worry and concern like a good mentor is supposed to do. You made Johnny bleed? Kreese didn't even bat an eye just told him to fuck you up worse and like some fucked up monster ran his fingers through the blood."

"Where are you going with this?" Daniel asked uneasily.

Dutch looked at him and laughed.

"Okay, so let me give you an example of Johnny. Right? Like you

know what went down so, whatever. So I just met Johnny right? We're in the same dojo, I'm not really that good but being mean like Kreese wants is easy right? Well, I get sick. So fucking sick. Ate some bad crabs or some shit and like I'm out on the street unable to move and think I'm going to fucking die and Johnny sees me, right? He's walking past with that Walkman of his and I don't say a word because the dojo is like show no weakness bullshit and I'd been there longer or whatever and like if it was Bobby or something Bobby'd help but this kid's new. But Johnny spots me right, leaning in an alleyway like some drunken bum and he stops and he takes off those headphones and he's listening to some rock band or something and he recognizes me from the dojo and he's like "Dutch right? What happened to you?" and is looking around like some ninja's had jumped out of thin air and kicked my ass and not some fried crab monstrosity that I thought sounded fine and was cheap as fuck was using my stomach as a trampoline. I wanted to tell him to fuck off but the dude was hauling me up, asking where I lived and I could just barely say. He dragged my ass home played nurse despite all my bitching, didn't fucking leave my side. Both my parents were out on a business trip so it was just me and he didn't even ask. Didn't look around and say where are your parents? Didn't try to call them. Just rolled up his sleeves and made me eat saltines and drink so much juice and water and kept my head from falling in the toilet when I was too tired to keep it up after being sick for hours. He didn't make fun of me for eating the dodgiest crab in California, he didn't leave, even though I cursed him out, even though despite all my posturing I was glad I wasn't alone, and dude if I liked men I would've fucking asked him to marry me. Like no dude does shit like that. We all got better stuff to do. But Johnny shows up, puts in the effort and the work when you let him. I crashed my bike and he was the first one to notice I wasn't with the group anymore and he's the one who went hunting down the hill I went down, searching to figure out where the hell I went, he's the one who carried me out of that and got me to a hospital. Like he's the leader of our group for a reason. Even if we never say it. And I'm sure the other guys think the same. Have their own stories. It's not just because he could kick our ass or because he won the All Valley twice or was Kreese's favorite." Dutch met Daniel's eyes for a moment then flicked them away again. "He's just, not as bad as you thought okay?"

Daniel looked at Dutch with a frown. Was he being serious? What was happening? Had Daniel fallen into the twilight zone or something? Dutch saw his frown and frowned back then rubbed his hands over his face as he pushed himself up muttering something to himself about maybe he was out of his depth because it was different. Maybe it was

harder or something. No wonder Johnny was miserable.

And Daniel perked up at that. "What do you mean Johnny's miserable?"

"When is he not?" Dutch muttered. He sighed, "Listen man, let's not let our bullshit ruin your senior year okay? There's still time to do fun shit. And like we're not going hurt you or anything anymore. Okay? Like Ali, that was fucked up. And I'm sorry you got in the middle of it and we went too far. But she made the stupidest choice the smartest girl I ever met could possibly make. Not that like picking you or anything was stupid, just like acting like she was suddenly too good for Johnny was...hard. And you were just making everything worse man. Ugh, anyway like there's a party at Jimmy's house on Friday, Ali usually comes to those with all her friends, and I know you haven't been to one because well, we've been assholes, so like you can come to this one and have fun and you know be a normal senior or have a good time or whatever. We'll be there, but again, you're fine. And we'll have beer and pizza and shit. Jimmy's cousin works at this brewery or whatever so he drops kegs off all the fucking time. If you don't want to drink that's fine too, there's always soda and Jimmy's aunt brings back tea from all over the world while she's doing business shit and coffee though like drinking coffee at 8pm on a Friday night is stupid, er, but you do you man. We're just, going to try and make things better, make your senior year more fun, right? Like makeup for lost time," Dutch said with a grin before jumping up and running back down the bleachers towards the teacher.

Everything in Daniel screamed it was a trap. They were going to, as he remembered Tommy yelling from the side of the mat, put him in a body bag. But something in him hesitated. Ali was going. Ali apparently *always* went. She never mentioned it to Daniel, never asked him to tag along. If she went and was fine with Johnny and the cobras being there then why couldn't Daniel? Johnny apologized. What if they meant it? What if they were opening the door to the cool table, what kind of adventures could be in store for him if he said yes? He was mulling it over through the rest of class, through his other classes, and at lunch when before Ali arrived at their table Bobby and Tommy sunk down next to him, chatting about some test they'd taken in the math class they had with Daniel.

"Daniel, what'd you get for number 3?" Tommy asked picking up his grilled cheese and taking a bite like sitting next to Daniel was an everyday occurrence.

"Uh 47," Daniel said.

"Told you," Bobby said with a laugh as Tommy groaned. "You always forget to carry the one."

Before Daniel could ask what they were doing and try and figure out if he'd accidentally sat at the wrong table or not Jimmy was sitting down with Dutch and the table was filling up fast. They were talking about some show they'd seen last night on some channel Daniel didn't get. His heart pounded. What would he say to Ali? *Sorry babe guess we're sitting with the school's gang of bullies and I guess that means your ex-boyfriend?* They'd left a seat open to his left and he hoped Ali hurried up. Hoped she'd know what to do because Daniel wasn't sure what he'd do if Johnny sat down with them.

He spotted the blonde boy who seemed frozen as he scanned the cafeteria looking for his friends only for him to spot them in a different spot and scan the group only to meet Daniel's gaze. He walked off but Bobby grabbed the back of his red jacket, the cobra patches Daniel realized were gone, ripped off or something and because of age, there was discoloration from where they used to be. He wondered what could go there instead.

"Hold it, hotshot," Bobby was saying. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Our table."

"Who cares what table we sit at? Sit down," Bobby said.

There was a look between the two of them, a command in Bobby's tone, and the way he held onto Johnny's jacket. Johnny went to walk to the other side of the table but Bobby didn't let go and looked at him pointedly and pulled him back. Dutch grabbed Johnny's tray before it fell with practiced ease as if this was some common occurrence and not the most bizarre lunch of Daniel's life and suddenly Johnny was being shoved into the empty seat next to Daniel. Daniel tried to focus on his sandwich and soup and not the fact that at a crowded table Johnny's legs were pressed up against his again and it was warm and how his heart wouldn't calm down and what the hell was he going to say to Ali?

They already misunderstood each other so much and she'd made it this big deal where she was done with this specific group of people and yet here he was surrounded by them as they talked about sports games and laughed about their classes and bemoaned tests and just

were...so fucking normal. His fingers curled around the edge of his tray, everything told him to run, but he stayed. Daniel was like his ma, stubborn as hell to the point of doing stupid shit, like poking bears with sticks because of curiosity. And it'd been so long since he'd been surrounded by people since he had to leave Newark that he wanted to know if it was real, if like, he could graduate with friends and more people to take photos with then his ma, Ali, and Mr. Miyagi. Because if he'd still been in Newark with all of his friends his life would've been so different. Though if he ever went back he'd have so many stories to tell they wouldn't believe him.

Louie thought he was lying about winning a karate tournament which had turned into a heated argument over the phone until his Ma took over and was like "yes, yes he did win. Kicked a boy in the face, never been so proud."

He spotted Ali who looked like she'd eaten something sour, face all pinched seeing Daniel sitting next to Johnny and Johnny just eating, not raising his blue eyes to see Ali. Ignoring her. They really were in a new world after all huh? Or maybe that punch Ali had apparently given Johnny had more power behind it than Daniel had thought. Her eyes were full of concern when she met his and he just smiled and shrugged, like *I don't have a fucking clue what happened but I'm fine.*

Susan who of course had been watching the proceeding stood up and called out Ali's name and Ali's eyes shot over to her old table, the table she sat at before Daniel and she looked back at Daniel, like *I'm not sitting there, not with them. You okay if I go sit somewhere else?* And Daniel nodded, somewhat relieved, having momentarily forgotten that unlike him, she had people to sit with, people who wanted her around.

He watched her not even come close to their table, quickly taking up her old seat with her friends like she'd never left and the laughter that filled the air. It kind of hurt. Yeah, it felt like a trap, but there was still a seat, she could've still sat across from him like always. She could've at least come over and said something, anything. She could've suffered through it *with* him.

He looked up from where he'd been stabbing at some stupid vegetable on his plate and saw that Bobby was breaking open some box out of his bag, and plopping lemon squares on everyone's tray, to the delight of most of the boys.

Johnny didn't look up, apparently greatly engrossed in his soup. He

looked miserable. Was sitting next to Daniel that bad? Shouldn't *he* be the one who was miserable? Dutch had spent gym class talking about how they'd make his life better and they'd scared off his girlfriend. How was this better? Was it because of Ali that Johnny was upset? Or was their table one of those things Johnny was attached to? Daniel turned to him with a frown.

"What, did you fight off some bastard to win your old table or something and so you're bummed you're not there? This one not get enough light for you or something? Sorry there weren't a lot of options when I got here. Some people kept blocking me from other tables and I wasn't expecting guests at my pity table," Daniel said, he was teasing but also not.

It was a thin line and he wasn't sure which side this would fall on. No wonder Johnny was relieved his knee wasn't damaged, he was out here picking fights with Johnny when Johnny was miserable for no damn reason. A lemon square was on his tray and Daniel's eyes flickered up to Bobby. A momentary worry of if it was poisoned passed and he looked back at Johnny who hadn't responded.

"You fail a test or something? Get in trouble for skipping school yesterday?"

No response.

The rest of the table quieted and Daniel rolled his eyes. He bumped his leg against Johnny, no response. What the hell? He sighed, there were things he wanted to say but didn't want to say in front of the group and they were too damn quiet.

"Listen, Ma agreed with you okay? Like what you said," Daniel said, quietly trying a different angle, a different approach. He didn't want to explain what, it was embarrassing to admit that apparently, he flirted with danger more than he ought to. "Apparently it's like this thing I didn't realize. But like people back home were used to it or whatever so it didn't cause me trouble there."

This was stupid. Why should he apologize in front of an audience? This would be sappy and stupid and these were not sappy friendly dudes.

"Heard there's a party or something on Friday. Haven't been to a party in California," Daniel tried again.

Nope, that didn't seem safe either. Sure Dutch had extended the

invitation, and yeah he wanted to go, but it sounded like he was fishing for a date and that was a bad idea. It's what he'd meant to say to Ali, not Johnny, he tried again.

"It's about around the time that we work on Mr. Miyagi's cars. Was thinking of doing that after school today, you know, if you want to come and help I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

That was more of an even path. More balanced, not too much in one direction or the other. He waited patiently and it seemed the others did too.

Bobby kicked Johnny and Johnny's head shot up with a glare, fingers curling into a fist until he saw the look Bobby gave him. His ears were red, his face was pink. Daniel watched as it spread picking up the lemon bar and taking a bite. Watching Johnny and his friends up close was fascinating, like watching animals in the wild or at the zoo. The dynamic was different. Different than when they were alone, or when they were chasing Daniel. It was like they were telling him to do something and he was struggling like he wanted to fight them about it for some reason, like he was too embarrassed or something which didn't make any sense.

Johnny's blue eyes finally met Daniel's as Daniel licked powdered sugar off his fingers, and suddenly they were gone, looking back down at his tray, ears bright red and Dutch was cackling and Bobby let out a groan and Daniel wondered if Johnny's ears were radiating heat and if he touched his ear if he'd feel it burning under his fingertips and he looked away because if he didn't he'd do it and if he did it he'd die.

There were posters on the walls that he never looked at before, reminders to wash hands and that prom was coming up and senior class photos and the senior field trip and a bunch of games. He wondered if there'd been one for the karate tournament that he'd never noticed before because he always kept his head down.

"Yeah," Johnny said softly after a long period of silence. It was like he was talking to his soup, not Daniel. "I'll help."

"Cool, I'll see you there," Daniel said.

He had to escape before he made a fool of himself. He was done eating, it was time to go.

"Uh, thanks for the lemon square. I'm going to get to class early. Enjoy the rest of your lunch," Daniel said hurrying and making his escape.

Not before he heard Tommy say, "Dude I've never seen someone strike out in such an abysmal way. That should've been easy. What the hell?"

"Shut up," Johnny said.

Invitations

Johnny drove to Mr. Miyagi's after school. Still replaying how tongue-tied and how much of a fool he'd made of himself at lunch. No matter how much he thought it over the guys were just moving too fast. He'd *just* realized his feelings and they were expecting too much from him.

He couldn't believe Bobby kicked him. Couldn't believe Dutch invited Daniel to Friday's party. They were laying the groundwork they said. He could still hear Dutch's cackle in his head.

At least there'd be work to do at Mr. Miyagi's, something to keep his mind off of it, off of Daniel and the way his tongue had dragged across his thumb while looking Johnny straight in the eyes.

"They're going to kill me," Johnny told the bonsai with a groan. "All of them."

He pulled his car into the parking lot. The yellow ford was there.

He could handle this. He'd just be working. When he worked last time he hadn't even realized Daniel was even there. Not until he finished with the roof.

Mr. Miyagi was setting supplies out and Johnny hurried over. No Daniel in sight. Just like he thought. Daniel might've said "We work on the cars" but Johnny had a feeling it was actually going to just be him. And that was fine. That was better.

"Let me help you, sir," Johnny offered, holding out his hands. He remembered Mr. Miyagi asked him to stop calling him sir. It would take a while to break that habit.

Mr. Miyagi smiled and nodded putting cans of car wax in his hands. "Welcome Johnny-san. Today wax cars, okay? Like showed Miyagi in store. But breathe, yes?"

"Yes, Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said turning to look at the cars in the lot, all in great condition.

He took off his jacket and set it carefully aside, rolling up his sleeves and getting to work. Like fixing the roof, it was nice to work with his hands. Nice to watch progress happen and that he'd done it. It was satisfying.

When he was little Sid had told him if he waxed all the cars in the garage he'd give Johnny a gift and Johnny had worked his ass off, thinking maybe that'd get some sort of common ground between the two, they both liked nice cars. But Sid forgot, asked why he was touching Sid's beautiful cars, even though he'd been doing what he'd been asked, but four or five drinks in Sid had forgotten. Johnny stayed the hell away from the garage and Sid's car collection after that, until he got the Avanti. The only gift he'd gotten was a black eye.

These cars though were loved. Not Mr. Miyagi showing off, not like Sid's cars. It wasn't some stuffy museum to showcase his wealth or status.

He breathed, waxed on, nice circular movements, and breathed and waxed off. The car sparkled beneath the cloth and he smiled, moving to the next spot.

He heard the crunch of feet on the dirt. It wasn't Mr. Miyagi's soft footsteps. Daniel leaned forward looking at Johnny.

"Didn't even bother coming in? Went straight to work? Mr. Miyagi makes this great iced green tea, you really should try it," Daniel said, holding two glasses in his hand, offering one out to Johnny.

"I just got started, but uh...thanks," Johnny said.

It was another heatwave, but he was used to it. He stood, carefully setting his supplies aside. Daniel had changed. No longer wearing what he had been in school. Johnny wondered if he'd had the clothes in his car, or if he left a change of clothes at Mr. Miyagi's for hot days. He was wearing cut-off jean shorts that someone cut off higher than almost any jeans Johnny had seen in the store and a short-sleeved crop top. The karate gods hated Johnny. He took the offered glass, reminding himself to focus.

"In Newark this time of year it's snowing, like up to here," Daniel said motioning to his hip. "How do you live like this? It's always so damn hot."

Johnny nodded, dragging his eyes away from the exposed tan skin and to his green drink. He took a sip. It wasn't like any tea he'd had before. He liked it.

"It's a heatwave. We get lots of those," Johnny said. "You get used to it."

"Is that why you've been wearing long pants?" Daniel asked toeing his shoe over against Johnny's ankle. "I'd suffocate in those."

"They... breathe," Johnny managed. He couldn't say it was because the scratches on his thigh were still healing and the guys kept giving him shit about it. That he didn't want to keep having that conversation with everyone who noticed.

Daniel dipped with a frown on his face to a crouch and felt the fabric at Johnny's shin, a jolt ran down Johnny's spine and he tried to remember like Mr. Miyagi said, breathe, just breathe. Don't forget to breathe.

"They don't feel like it."

"They're linen," Johnny said.

"Is this like some country club thing?" Daniel said standing up suddenly so close he nearly headbutted Johnny.

Johnny leaned back a little. Too close. Way too close. He was forgetting to breathe.

"No," Johnny said. "You can wear shorts at the country club. They impose a length thing, but really only with girls."

Daniel frowned. "That's stupid,"

"Yeah, Ali complained about it all the time. Skirts and shorts on girls have to be knee-length. You'd probably be fine with what you're wearing. They wouldn't really stop you."

Oh god, someone shut him up. Don't point out that everything was short. That if Daniel raised his arms it'd probably be like he wasn't even wearing a shirt. This was Mr. Miyagi's house, an old guy's house, did the guy not care? Or was this some test? Like how in some romantic action book he read the hero had to keep training despite the beautiful babe sunbathing nearby to show he was worthy.

Johnny was just supposed to be waxing cars, not suffering.

He breathed in slowly.

If this *wasn't* Daniel would he even have cared?

He breathed out.

No, he wouldn't have.

In the summer at Tommy's beach house he'd worn something similar and hadn't thought about it at all. The girls on the beach liked it. He got so many numbers. It was like the time Ali wore a miniskirt for the first time on one of their dates. Sent his mind spiraling and short-circuiting.

"That sucks," Daniel said. "Did Mr. Miyagi tell you how to wax the cars?"

"Yeah," Johnny said trying to find a safe spot to look, but after his dream, it was hard to find a safe spot to look. He tried Daniel's hand, which was holding the glass, but condensation was dripping down his fingers and they were glistening and wet and then he remembered Daniel looking at him while licking his fingers at lunch and Johnny looked down at the drink in his hand and took another sip and then out at the house. "Green tea huh? It's not uh, sweet."

Daniel laughed. "No, Mr. Miyagi says it's healthy. He usually drinks it hot, but on really hot days he makes it cold with ice. It's nice right?"

"It is."

"Hey, so Dutch mentioned a party on Friday. Is this like some more hazing? Am I going to wake up drunk on some stranger's lawn naked and covered in sharpie?" Daniel asked, a playful smile on his lips.

"No, it's a legit party," Johnny said. "And you're invited. Think you'll come?"

"Will you be there?" Daniel asked leaning closer.

"Yeah, I'll be there," Johnny said. "You should come."

Daniel turned back to the car and leaned against it folding his arms across his chest.

"I'm trying to figure out how to ask Ma, she worries, especially if it's full of cobras. But if you're there, she *might* be okay with it."

Johnny felt warmth flood his veins. He was good with parents, most parents, okay some parents. Just not Sid. Who wasn't *really* a parent. So he wasn't sure if it even counted. And to know he'd redeemed himself in Mrs. LaRusso's eyes was a relief.

"You can tell her what most people tell their parents."

"What?" Daniel asked quirking his eyebrow and tilting his head.

"Jimmy has a cover for the party, for parents, and I mean it's like actually useful. He invites college kids from different colleges around and promises them free beer and a gift bag if they come down and talk to us about the college experience. Like what to expect, what not to expect, tips for scholarships and passing classes and being on your own for the first time and stuff like that. Stuff to prepare. I think it's some football guys from UCLA this week," Johnny said.

"That sounds like the least cobra party I ever expected to hear about," Daniel said laughing.

"Everyone's drunk by the end of the night, usually the college kids are passed out in some of the guest rooms, but that way everyone's got like a cover if their parents ask. Some tidbit or two, like shower shoes in communal showers are a must, or figure out how to do your own laundry before you go and how to cook like a meal or two."

"Huh," Daniel said with a warm smile at Johnny. "Who'd have thought. California parties are useful."

"Just Jimmy's." He took a sip of his drink. Daniel was right. It was too hot. And yet for some reason, the boy was full of endless playful energy. He realized suddenly that he could make a small move and if he didn't the guys would kill him.

"Do you miss snow?" Johnny asked turning suddenly, apparently too suddenly because Daniel started but he didn't retreat. It was progress.

"Well yeah, this *isn't* winter. This is like summer part two revenge of the sun," Daniel said, recovering and tugging his shirt from his chest with a frown.

"Do you still have all your winter stuff?" Johnny asked. "From Newark?"

"Yeah. Why? Can Johnny Lawrence also make it snow?"

There was teasing in his eyes a playful smile tugging on his lips.

"No," Johnny said. "But there's stuff planned like through the rest of the year."

He scuffed his shoe through the dirt, looking down at it. He could do this. If Daniel was willing to go to a party. He might be up for this. The guys had said to make his year better. So he could do it.

"Figured after the tournament we'd just keep the party going, or...whatever, that was the plan. So this week is a college party. Next weekend we're driving out to Jimmy's family's lodge. It's out in the mountains near a ski resort with snow. You want to come with?" Johnny asked, trying to keep the hope out of his eyes and face, trying not to seem too desperate for Daniel to say yes.

Daniel's brown eyes were wide, looking up at him. He pushed off the car, suddenly close again. "Seriously?" Daniel asked.

"Seriously," Johnny repeated, softly. Trying not to retreat. To stand his ground.

"A lodge, with actual snow?"

"Yes."

"For a whole weekend?"

"We could pick you up from South Seas on that Friday, bring you back Sunday night."

Johnny's hands felt clammy. It sounded like a date. A date that was a sleepover. A date that couldn't be a date because Daniel was dating Ali, but they could still spend the weekend together, enjoy the snow. It could be fun. He'd make the guys promise to behave.

"Hell yes!" Daniel said like Johnny had just awarded his a thousand dollars.

His hand came to Johnny's arm, his forearm, and gave it a squeeze because Daniel as Johnny was realizing was like a cat, who for some reason needed to show he was okay by touching and kneading him like he was dough, for some reason it was pleasant.

Johnny smiled softly, he'd done that. He'd finally invited Daniel to something that made him happy, did something that made him happy, that smile was because of Johnny. And it wouldn't be a problem. The guys would've actually probably killed Johnny if he hadn't attempted to invite Daniel. That or they would've done it anyway. Scheming bastards.

"Great, pack your warm clothes, and a good winter jacket and boots. The snow usually comes up to my knees," Johnny said. "Not as deep as Newark, but, it's still snow."

"I can't wait," Daniel said and then he was pulling away, taking the empty glass from Johnny's hands, fingers brushing his. "Have fun waxing the cars."

Johnny nodded, turning back to the cars and the task at hand. They would be proud. This couldn't hurt Ali. Right? Like it was just normal. Going to a ski resort with friends. To a lodge.

He picked up his tools again and went back to work. He felt great. It wasn't a *date* date, it wasn't like going on trips with Ali or anything, but he'd get to spend the whole weekend with Daniel, and he'd see him at the party and Mr. Miyagi still had a lot of stuff to do around the house. And maybe that was enough. Maybe he didn't need to steal him away from Ali, maybe just being his friend would be enough for him. The guys wouldn't like it, but this, this was nice. A gift of snow for a homesick kid from Jersey.

It took a while because Johnny wanted to do a good job. And when Mr. Miyagi came out and said he'd done a good job Johnny felt pleased. The sun had set, and the low light hit just right so the cars practically sparkled.

Mr. Miyagi herded Johnny inside and to a table where Daniel was sitting on the floor and dinner was waiting. Johnny sat next to him, the food was delicious like last time and Daniel talked the whole time, animatedly moving his hands, talking about how his Ma was making him take his crutches everywhere and how sitting out at gym was awkward and how the gym teacher nearly fought him over it and Daniel had dared the teacher to call Dr. Fletcher and waste her time repeating what was already on his note. And how silly it felt to be on the sidelines and unable to play.

He mentioned the party on Friday and Mr. Miyagi perked up at that, asked about the party and then Daniel's hand slapped down on Johnny's thigh, as he explained it was one of the other cobra's parties and apparently it was some fancy college thing to like learn more about college culture but also fun and that Johnny would be there and it'd his first party this school year, other than the beach party that was really just soccer on the beach that ended badly. Johnny felt awful as he remembered that night on the beach, but Daniel didn't move his hand and Johnny did his best to ignore it.

He focused on using the chopsticks. He was getting better at it he thought, but it still wasn't easy.

Mr. Miyagi was nodding and saying it sounded fun and turned to Johnny.

"Johnny-san have parties often?"

"Oh, I don't. My home...it's not the best for parties... I can't really host them. But my friends can, so they do, and they're nice," Johnny said.

His Mom didn't care about the parties, just told him to be careful with his drinks and make sure everyone behaved themselves and didn't drink too much. But Johnny would never even think to have a party at Sid's. He had birthday parties there when he was younger, but he quickly learned they weren't for him, it was for Sid to show off, an excuse to have meetings and rub elbows with other people who had kids and try and get on their good side. It was all smoke and mirrors. One of the only useful things he'd found Johnny for as a kid was an excuse to have parents over who he hadn't otherwise found an in with.

"Ah, I see," Mr. Miyagi said with a nod, scooping more food onto Johnny's plate.

"We are having events for the rest of the year though," Johnny said. "Next week is a lodge at a ski resort that Daniel might join us on."

He didn't know why he was telling Mr. Miyagi, he was too excited, it wasn't a date, it really *really* wasn't a date.

Mr. Miyagi nodded, smiling softly.

"Daniel-san excited to see snow?"

"Very much so," Daniel said with a grin, the conversation turning to Newark like usual, telling about how much snow they generally got, how much he missed winter being actual winter, and all the fun things to do during winter.

Johnny listened, he felt odd. After a while of mulling over what was different, he realized it was because he felt relaxed. He didn't want this moment to ever end. He wanted to spend forever sitting on the floor around Mr. Miyagi's table with Daniel and Mr. Miyagi. Daniel could talk about whatever he wanted, Johnny didn't care. His continuous stream of conversation was comforting, the hand on his leg

was comforting. The food Mr. Miyagi gave him was delicious, the way he always refilled Johnny's plate, the way he listened intently to anything Johnny said.

It was so nice. He felt so calm. Tears pricked at the corner of his eyes, he wanted to put his hand over Daniel's and give it a squeeze but was worried it'd be misconstrued somehow.

Johnny didn't want to leave, he didn't want to go home. Let him set up his tent in the yard and he'd be happy forever if he could just stay with these two.

The tears threatened to fall so he looked up, he didn't want to have to explain himself.

He breathed in and out, slow deep breaths.

Mr. Miyagi had given him a list, things to do throughout the rest of the week until Friday, things to do over the weekend, and it was such a relief that he was welcome back, that he could keep coming back. Painting was next, there were lights that needed to be replaced that Johnny could easily reach, Mr. Miyagi was going to show him some basic gardening, he had weeding to do, was going to prune some shrubs, sand the wooden boards outside, there were birdhouses and bat houses Mr. Miyagi wanted to make, was going to show him how to fix stuff around the South Seas apartment complex, was going to show Johnny how to fix some cars. They were going to rotate the tires, change the oil.

It was a long list and Johnny couldn't wait to come back, was so glad that the door was open to him to come back again and again. That he could be useful.

7 minutes in heaven

Chapter Notes

Moving some things around from the movie(s) timeline again.

As the week progressed Daniel found the ex-cobras at his table daily. They fell in around his table as if they'd always been there. They joked with him, they settled into their seats the same as before and Ali went to her old friends. Daniel didn't know why he found it a relief. He liked it more than he felt like he should've. Bobby brought treats every single day. Lemon bars turned into cookies which turned into brownies and cupcakes. It was like a never-ending pile of sugar.

"His family owns a bunch of bakeries, using his great grandmother's recipes and create their own. They're always experimenting," Tommy explained while they were digging into the cupcakes. "Trying to come up with new things to try, so their home is always bursting with sweets."

Bobby laughed. "I'm always sent to school with treats to try and get rid of some of them, but it's like trying to bail water out of a ship with a teaspoon."

Daniel was down for it. They were always delightful and it was nice to be a part of something, to share something. He wondered, what it'd be like to have them all in his tiny apartment, all these guys who lived in big houses, crammed around his kitchen table while he and his mother made one of her Italian dinners that was always too much food. They weren't there yet he knew. It'd been less than a week, but maybe, if their relationship started to heal the way it had been with Johnny then maybe, maybe he could cram them around his kitchen table and his mother would delight in feeding so many people.

Maybe they could start slow though, with Johnny. Johnny seemed to be in the need of home-cooked meals made with love and not from staff that were rude to him. He always looked so stunned and happy whenever Mr. Miyagi cooked for him that Daniel wanted to cook for him too. What would the look be on Johnny's face if Daniel made one of his mother's recipes and then set it down in front of Johnny? He wanted to see it.

Johnny he noticed didn't talk much at lunch, but when he did they all quieted and listened. It wasn't like he wasn't being a part of the

conversation, he was just quiet. He listened intently.

Throughout the week despite not seeing Johnny on Monday Daniel saw a lot of him. After school, he was always at Mr. Miyagi's home. While embers of jealously still sparked when he realized Mr. Miyagi was training him the way he'd trained Daniel it was hard to be too mad for long because Johnny didn't know. Johnny hadn't asked to learn. He just thought he was helping and doing chores. And there were things Mr. Miyagi had Johnny do that he'd never asked Daniel to do, like weeding or changing the light bulbs, which made sense. Johnny could reach them without needing a ladder.

He wondered if Mr. Miyagi would ever tell Johnny he was training him slowly.

Plus there were some things he had them all do together like fix the cars. The way he popped the hood and went over the basics and showed them how to fix things. It felt nice, like something Daniel had dreamed of doing with his dad when he was older, if his dad hadn't died.

And Johnny was so attentive, like a sponge, soaking up everything. A month ago Daniel would've scoffed, why would a rich boy from Encino need to know how to fix a car when he probably had enough money that if he got a flat tire and could just buy a new car rather than replace the tire. But Daniel had seen how Johnny cared for the Avanti, how he'd never complained while he worked, and treated each of the cars Mr. Miyagi had him work on like they were precious.

Johnny had even waxed Daniel's Ford and Daniel had been so shocked. Mr. Miyagi had come out to see him off and smiled by his side.

"He waxed my car too!" Daniel said. "I didn't even notice!"

"Johnny-san has a good heart," Mr. Miyagi said. "Hard-working."

"Are you going to tell him you're training him?"

"Not yet. Still too much darkness, too much pain, too wounded. We pull him up out of the darkness first."

Daniel thought about that with a frown. It felt like Johnny was on the mend, but then he remembered at dinner the glassy look Johnny had gotten all of a sudden. He'd been about to cry but had held off.

Mr. Miyagi didn't want him to become obsessed. Didn't want Johnny to fall into old habits.

He'd watched Mr. Miyagi slowly and methodically adjust things. He was trying to get him out of the military habits Kreese had instilled. Johnny no longer stood, waiting with his hands behind his back. He still stood with his head held high and his shoulders back, but not with his arms locked behind him while he waited for Mr. Miyagi to give him orders. He was catching himself from calling Mr. Miyagi sir.

There were all sorts of things Daniel never realized were bad habits that Kreese had instilled and like with his bonsai Mr. Miyagi was carefully trimming the rotten parts. The parts that Kreese had poisoned. He was healing wounds and Daniel hadn't even realized that's what Mr. Miyagi was doing.

Mr. Miyagi had seen a glimmer of who Johnny could be and was working hard and patiently to help Johnny there like the way he'd helped Daniel all the time.

"So Daniel," Jimmy was saying and Daniel looked up from his tray. "You coming tonight?"

"Uh yeah," Daniel said.

"Awesome," Jimmy said pulling a piece of paper out of his notebook and scribbling something down on it and then handing it over to Daniel. "The address, time, and phone number, in case your mom gets worried or something so she can get a hold of us. The numbers for the office phone, so like if things get wild that room never is. It's off-limits, we make sure to check for parent calls just in case something happens."

"Do things happen?" Daniel asked taking the paper concerned.

"One of the girls, Susie I think it was, her younger brother had his appendix nearly burst so her parents tried to call and get ahold of us to let her know because they were at the hospital. Thankfully it's the only time we've had to use it."

"What did Susie do?"

"She was drunk but wanted to be with her family, so Johnny drove her to the hospital," Tommy said with a smile. "We try to keep a few designated drivers around in case of emergencies. But a lot of people just pass out around the house and drive home in the morning. Their

parents don't care, but some people, their parents do care. So we drive them home or call them a taxi."

"Why didn't you send her in a taxi?" Daniel asked turning to Johnny.

"She was crying, freaking out... I didn't think she should've been alone," Johnny said quietly.

He had icing on his cheek, Daniel realized and reached out rubbing his thumb over Johnny's cheek before he could think of why that'd be a bad idea to do in front of the ex-cobras. His mom did it all the time, he'd done it for Louie, for Ali, it was just a habit and he acted before he thought about it. At least he stopped himself before licking the icing off of his thumb and wiped it on a napkin instead, at least he didn't lick a napkin and dab Johnny's cheek the way his mom did.

He breathed before anyone said anything. He gathered up his tray with the napkin.

"I'll see you all there," he said taking his tray and hurrying away before they could ask him *what the hell?* Before Johnny could react. Before he could deal with the fact that what he'd wanted to do had been to lick it directly off of Johnny's cheek and was so glad that he had at least that much impulse control.

He would've died. Johnny would've killed him. He was lucky Johnny hadn't hit him for babying him.

He could hear their laughter, the ex-cobras laughter and he glanced back, Johnny was as red as a tomato. He hurried to his classroom, heart-pounding, half expecting Johnny to bolt up and charge after him, but the footsteps never came.

Daniel drove up the long drive to Jimmy's house. He was on time. He didn't know if California had its own party rules. He'd heard that early was too early and to never be early, but he wondered if fashionably late was the time you were supposed to arrive.

But Daniel couldn't handle sticking around the house any longer. His mother was bursting with questions, hovering and reminding him to be careful, kept touching his hair. He couldn't handle it anymore. She wanted him to take the crutches and he told her he'd take care of himself. He wasn't going to like go for a run or something stupid. She asked if he planned to drink and he said he didn't know, if he felt safe,

maybe. He got a lecture for that, but he didn't want to lie to her. She could always see straight through him when he did.

"You keep an eye on your drinks. Every drink you have you drink water too, lots of water. Alcohol is dehydrating, it's not like having a glass of wine at one of our family dinners. This is a party it'll be easy to forget. So drink water and eat. Eat lots of snacks or else you'll be too sick to enjoy your Saturday. I'll put a glass of water and some aspirin next to your bedside table. Take some money," she said pulling out her wallet and pushing some cash in his hand. "Don't you dare drive home if you do any drinking, take a taxi. Okay? Promise me you won't drink and drive, even if you think you'll feel up for it?"

He promised her, pocketing the cash. He wasn't planning to get blackout drunk. He just thought if he was offered a beer or something he wouldn't turn it down. Unless it was a trap. But he was starting to think it wasn't. Not with the way the ex-cobras talked at lunch. Not the way they interacted with him in class. Not with the way they sort of surrounded him, not ready to rip him apart or fight him, but like friends that wanted him included.

It didn't feel like pity. It didn't feel like how it was sitting at lunch with Ali even though every day her friends called her name. The way when they first started dating she'd hover for a moment torn, how the one time Daniel sat with them, how awkward it had felt. How clearly they hadn't wanted him there. Just Ali. But they were suffering his company on her behalf. How they clearly thought this was a phase, that he wasn't good enough. They never said it, but it was the atmosphere. They shared things, they talked to each other, but it never included him.

It wasn't like the treats Bobby put on his plate, not like the conversation that flowed easily, how they asked Daniel things about their shared classes, invited him to hang out.

The red Avanti was parked in the drive and Daniel parked his car next to it. He half expected to see the bonsai in the passenger seat and wondered where it was, would Johnny risk taking it into a house that was expected to be full of drunk high school kids and college football players? Daniel wanted to ask them about sports programs, were they harder to get into? Were there clubs he could join to do soccer that wasn't like a fancy scholarship league? If he was going to college he wanted to play soccer again, he figured he could start over and try again. He'd wanted so badly to be a part of a team when he'd moved to California and that dream had shattered early and he'd found

something else, not a team, but karate. He doubted colleges had karate clubs, and he didn't really want to do karate in college. He didn't want to learn under anyone but Mr. Miyagi.

He stood on Jimmy's doorstep. It was as intimidating as Ali's when her parents had suddenly shown up and he'd knocked a brick loose. He took a deep breath and knocked. It was such a big house he wondered if the doorbell would've been better. There wasn't music pounding yet, but there were a few cars around the house, so it hadn't not started yet. The door swung open and Jimmy grinned.

"Hey Daniel! Come in man, usually, people just come in, but like, thanks for knocking," he said holding the door wide and stepping out of the way so Daniel could come in. "College kids are here if you want to ask them questions before the party gets rolling. They tend to come early and we chat with them to like break the ice or whatever. I'll...actually..." Jimmy stopped himself and turned his head. "JOHNNY!" he yelled and Daniel jumped.

"What?" Johnny called back.

Daniel caught sight of him, he was carrying a keg.

"You asked me to move the kegs, what do you want now?"

"Daniel's here, show him around will you?" Jimmy answered, voice carrying through the halls, his tone sweet and a grin on his lips.

There was a loud thunk of the keg being sat down heavily and then Johnny was coming to the door glaring at Jimmy. "I swear you host these parties so that you can get us all to do work for you so you can just flit around and flirt with girls."

Jimmy burst out laughing, and slapped Johnny's shoulder, pulling his hand away quickly when Johnny flinched.

"Dude, Daniel's never been here. It's a fucking maze, you know that," he said holding out his arms all at ease and motioning towards the rest of the house. "So yeah I'd rather start making moves on some hot babes, do you blame me?"

Daniel didn't think he'd ever seen Jimmy so at ease, he had the home advantage and he gave Daniel a wink. "Have fun Daniel, welcome, make yourself at home," he said before dipping off into another room with a big smile on his face. There was no malice in it but it was a side of Jimmy he had never seen.

Johnny sighed next to him and Daniel looked up at his blue eyes, he was rubbing the back of his neck.

"Yeah, okay," he said. "Follow me."

He turned and headed down the halls.

"So you're on time, which is cool, the college kids always arrive early to settle into the guest rooms or whatever and we spend the time up to now running errands for them because their guests. I think Dutch is still out trying to find some fancy Greek yogurt they need for breakfast. The amount of food they can eat was overwhelming. I thought *we* ate a lot. So this is where the kegs are," Johnny said opening a door to an outside patio where several kegs sat. There was a fire pit in the distance that Tommy was coaxing to life and a pool.

He continued on to a kitchen bigger than Daniel's apartment. Johnny opened the fridge and pulled out glass bottles of soda and twisted off the caps, passing one to Daniel. "Mexican Coca-cola," he explained tapping his bottle against Daniel's with a clink of cheers then motioned to the bowls set out. "Snacks, all help yourself. Did you eat dinner?"

"I did," Daniel said sipping from the soda wondering what the deal was, why Johnny hadn't offered and then had just foisted the drink upon him, but then he tasted it, it was different, better, he looked at Johnny, eyes wide and Johnny smirked,

"Good, yeah these go fast, so it's a plus of coming early. Jimmy's family has an in with drink manufacturers around the globe, so there are always fun drinks in their fridge to try. Next time they've got Japanese soda's I'll grab you and Mr. Miyagi some, but their latest shipment was from Mexico," Johnny said opening the fridge and pointing out the colorful sodas with labels in Spanish. "These are those, but these, are the best of the group," he said holding up his bottle. "There's also all like the regular sodas you can find at the store," he said motioning towards all the brands Daniel was familiar with, all the cans of soda.

"There's no food in this fridge," Daniel said in shock. It was the biggest fridge he'd ever seen and it was all soda and beer.

"Yeah, they've got four fridges in here."

"Seriously?" Daniel said studying the room, "Where?"

"They're hidden, they match with the cabinets," Johnny said pulling open a cabinet that Daniel thought was a pantry and revealed a fridge that when he opened it he saw was full of food. "It's good it's hidden because when people start smoking they get hungry and after all our running around for the college kids, we really don't want everyone to like demolish the fancy shit we had to hunt down for their breakfast. We're going to order a shit ton of pizzas so don't worry, there will be food," Johnny said heading to another end of the kitchen then turning and motioning with his head for Daniel to follow.

He unlocked a door from a set of keys he kept in his pocket and showed Daniel the office. The walls were covered from floor to ceiling with bookshelves crammed with books and a big desk with a big chair and a phone in the middle. "This is the phone Jimmy was talking about, the number you gave Mrs. LaRusso right?"

Daniel nodded. "Yeah, I left her the info Jimmy gave me."

"So this is where she'd call. There's a voice answering machine. We check it several times throughout the night. If for some reason you need to make a call and it needs to be quiet, use this phone. The walls are thicker here, so the party doesn't filter in as much. But come find one of us if you need to make a call. We keep it locked because any rooms that are unlocked end up being used and Jimmy's parents would murder us if teens made out or had sex in their office," Johnny said ushering Daniel out and locking the door behind him.

Daniel felt his face burn red. He hadn't thought of that. Johnny had said it so casually. He followed Johnny down the hall.

"Bathroom number one," Johnny said opening the door. "There are twelve bathrooms. But only four are going to be open. If we leave too many things open people end up in them and it requires more cleaning," he said, showing Daniel where all four of the bathrooms were before walking him to a living room where he could hear people talking, low male voices laughing.

Johnny opened the door and motioned for Daniel to grab a seat on one of the chairs. Daniel sunk into it and was surprised at how comfortable it was. Sitting around the room were college guys, a few college girls, and a few of Daniel's classmates. One of the guys was broad-shouldered and had an easy smile. He had green eyes and brown hair and was talking about the cafeteria food at UCLA.

"You need something, find one of us okay?" Johnny whispered quietly

into Daniel's ear that sent a shiver down Daniel's spine before Johnny left.

Daniel wasn't worried about being alone at a party. He was a people person. He thrived around people. He liked talking. But this was his first real California party and if he was honest with himself he'd kind of hoped Johnny would stick around, stay by his side. Introduce him to people. But it was fine. Ali was supposed to come anyway, and maybe outside of school it'd be easier, maybe people wouldn't treat him like a pariah like they had after the first fight he'd gotten in on the beach.

A girl was asking the guys if classes were really as scary as they sounded. The green-eyed guy laughed.

"Oh no, like some classes are hard, but I had this teacher post on their door that they had a headache so our final was open book if we could promise to be quiet. Like if you actually study a little and drop out of classes that think you'll fail no matter how hard you try or study or if you think you'd be bored or would hate it before the cut off then you're fine."

Daniel leaned forward. "Are there casual sports clubs?"

Green eyes fell on him. "Yeah, there are clubs for everything and if they don't have it you only need like what, three or so other people to start a club. You want intermural sports. We play varsity football ball but sometimes we play with the intermural teams. It's less pressure and more fun, so we can test out things in a low-stakes environment."

Daniel took this with a smile, listening as they answered questions about Greek life, about events, and dealing with stress. Before Daniel knew it the room was filling up and he realized he heard music in the distance. He'd had his fill of listening to the college kids and stood, letting some girl take his seat and going off to explore, wondering where Ali was.

Dutch's arm found his shoulders almost immediately after leaving the room and Daniel stiffened but Dutch paid no mind steering him away.

"I heard you were around," Dutch said with a grin. "Of course Johnny stowed you away in there, he knew I wouldn't even check. Hate the college guys, they're so...annoying. I thought the football team at least would be cool, you know, it's a contact sport, but nah, they gotta eat diets that are all measured out like a prissy purebred rich ladies dog. Annoying as hell." Dutch was steering him through the halls.

There was a group hanging out in one of the large hallways, groups of girls and guys talking animatedly and Johnny listening.

"We're thinking of playing games, you wanna play some games Daniel?" Dutch asked, there was something mischievous in his smile that made Daniel uneasy but Daniel wasn't about to back down from a challenge.

"Sure," Daniel said.

"Sweet, told you guys, Daniel's down. Let's play."

He motioned for them to all follow him and he opened one of the doors and Daniel found himself in a rec room. There was a pool table in the corner and a dartboard on the wall. It reminded him of a bar and sure enough, there was a wet bar fully stocked in a corner. There was a ping pong table and a couple of chairs around a stack of board games, but Dutch led them to a couch. His hands went to Daniel's shoulders again, maneuvering him to sit down next to Johnny.

He picked up a hat, "So teams, right, teams of two? So let's do some charades yeah?" Dutch said with a grin hooking his arm with a girl.

"Want to be on my team?"

She nodded and carefully picked a piece of paper out of the hat.

Of all the games Daniel expected Dutch to go with he hadn't expected charades. He'd expected beer pong, or something cliché like spin the bottle. Having spent most of his dates with Ali at the theaters all the movies were fairly easy for Daniel to get. They'd seen *Ghostbusters* together, *Footloose*, *The Terminator, Indiana Jones*, and so many more. He and Johnny were winning and it was exciting. The losing team was pushed into a closet. Daniel didn't pay attention, too focused on their strategy, on winning that when they started to lose, he was shocked.

It'd switched over suddenly from movies to sports and Dutch was winning and the other teams knew more about California sports than Daniel did, and then they lost the round and Dutch was grinning and Johnny was glaring at Dutch like Dutch had planned this, but it was random. It was topics, they had no way of knowing that Daniel only paid attention to his home teams in New Jersey and didn't care about fancy California sports. No way of knowing that all the other teams would be better at it. Daniel was being led to a door and he noticed something he hadn't until that moment, all the other teams were one girl and one boy.

"Hey," Daniel said as Dutch opened the door wide with a grin pushing him into the linen closet. Daniel caught himself from falling, looking at Dutch, trying to figure out what was happening.

"Sorry man, this is the only way it works. The girls won't play with Johnny. Tried the whole damn party. No one would pair up with him. But they still wanted to play 7 minutes in heaven. It's the only way this will work. Besides you're dating Ali, so the girls wouldn't play with you either. So you know, thanks and have fun," Dutch said slamming his hand hard on Johnny's back and kicking his foot out so Johnny tripped into the closet. Dutch quickly slammed the door shut and locked it.

Daniel reached out and caught Johnny before he fell. After carrying so much stuff for Mr. Miyagi and training he could manage it. Johnny fell into his chest and arms pushing him back a bit, but Daniel changed his stance and kept them upright, so they wouldn't go tumbling and possibly knocking their heads into the shelves.

"So sneaky," Daniel said. "Or I'm so utterly oblivious. I didn't even realize what was going on."

Johnny's hand was on his arm and shoulder and his head was bowed and Daniel looked down at him as Johnny tried to figure out how to untwist his feet because there were bags of stuff on the floor that he'd gotten tangled up in. He grinned despite himself, catching Johnny, being able to look down at Johnny, at his soft-looking blonde hair was nice, to be so close he could smell his shampoo and that cologne. Johnny having to use him to stay upright, practically clinging to him like Daniel was sturdy the way he *knew* Johnny was, was such a change of roles that Daniel was delighted. Before Mr. Miyagi they both would've fallen to the ground, but the fact Daniel could catch him now and keep him steady was proof that Mr. Miyagi was making him stronger than he looked.

"7 minutes in heaven is a middle school game," Johnny said sourly. "Can't believe Dutch paired it up with charades, the bastard."

His ears were red Daniel noted and he filed that away with everything else, Johnny's breath, the hair that softly tickled his chin, the feeling of his hands, the way he was being held onto pressed up against while Johnny freed one trapped foot and then the other before standing upright.

"Sorry," Johnny said. "Dutch is an overgrown child."

Daniel laughed. "It's fine, I mean what he said makes sense. Anyone else and Ali would kill me. But why can't you play with some girl?"

Johnny looked away from him, there really wasn't a lot of space, so he couldn't retreat. "When Ali breaks up with someone apparently they're out of the dating pool. She's too popular."

"Seriously?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah, her family has too much pull. I'm like untouchable the rest of senior year."

"But she broke up with you."

"I think it makes it worse, somehow, like if I wasn't good enough for her, then I'm not good enough or worth the effort for anyone else," Johnny said looking up at the light bulb and the cord swinging.

Daniel watched him with a deep frown. He said it so casually, like he'd just given up on dating for the rest of the year. A year he was still determined to have fun during but solo, like a forever third wheel. No wonder they kept grabbing Daniel to hang out with Johnny. Daniel rose his hands to just above Johnny's elbows, testing to see where the flinching started, careful to not go up too far.

"That sucks, I'm sorry."

"It's fine, it's probably for the best if I don't date any other girls at our school."

"We're keeping you too busy anyway," Daniel said lightly trying to cheer him up."I mean Mr. Miyagi's got you working so hard."

Johnny looked down at him and those blue eyes looked so dark in this lighting he smiled so softly, such a small smile. He didn't smile a lot but he had been more recently and it always made Daniel's heart flutter.

"I like helping."

The thought of chores making someone happy was such a weird thought to Daniel, but he knew that feeling of making Mr. Miyagi proud. It was like winning something. He got it. Daniel had so many questions he wanted to ask Johnny. He wanted a book on Johnny, to read it from the beginning, wanted to know about his parents, wanted to know everything, wanted to collect all those smiles that made him

feel warm inside. He wondered if he could make Johnny smile more. If he could, like Mr. Miyagi said help pull him out of the darkness, nurse his wounds and keep him by his side.

"Did you get your questions answered?" Johnny asked.

Daniel frowned, confused. He hadn't asked Johnny his questions yet. Had he said something aloud?

"The college guys?" Johnny asked again.

"Oh, yeah. It was interesting. If I go to college I think I'll try intermural sports, like soccer."

"Sorry about that," Johnny said softly.

Daniel smiled up at him gently giving his arms a squeeze. "I'll forgive you for that one," he said, teasingly. "If you help me find somewhere and some group to play with before the end of the year."

It was a joke, he was already too busy, but Johnny nodded thoughtfully.

"I'll ask around."

Right, Johnny took his requests seriously. He laughed softly, he could ask the guy to find him a piece of the moon and he'd probably bring him one. That was too much power to give Daniel and the possibilities were endless if he let his mind go down that route. He had to be careful with this power.

"Have you seen Ali yet?" Johnny asked after a while.

He was speaking so softly but Daniel was so close that he could hear everything if he tried, the sound of Johnny's heart-pounding, the gentle sound of his breath.

"I haven't. Where is she usually?"

Johnny tilted his head thoughtfully. "Her and her friends like to swim in the pool and then hang out in the jacuzzi. She also always brings a notebook full of questions, so she's usually like spending an hour or so with the college students, taking notes. She drinks some, by her third drink she's usually dancing. If she's on her fourth drink..." Johnny trailed off like he didn't want to say and then sighed. "Be near her if she's had her fourth drink."

"What happens then?"

"Dance with her. She gets... handsy," Johnny mumbled. "Flirty."

Daniel flushed, he'd never seen Ali drink, at least not much. He'd seen her have a beer once or twice, but the fact Johnny knew her habits reminded him that Johnny had been with her long enough to pick out the pattern, had seen every part of Ali, they'd probably had sex. They knew each other better than Daniel ever could guess. He probably knew what she liked. How to touch her, where to touch her. And she'd probably seen all the faces Daniel had been collecting, knew how he felt in her arms. What Johnny liked. It was too much and he couldn't get his mind off of it. He couldn't let go of Johnny and he had nowhere he could go. He was trapped with this knowledge, this realization he hadn't thought of. Was Johnny good in bed? Did they do it a lot? Did Ali miss it? They were going slow but was it too slow?

He looked away from Johnny down at the towels heart pounding. He didn't even have a condom on him. What if she wanted to? He wasn't prepared. Would she be prepared? Was Johnny the kind of guy who always had a condom on him? Should he have been carrying one with him all this time? Their relationship felt too volatile for it to happen suddenly at a party. Like they were constantly getting into fights. But maybe that was like a preamble and he just hadn't known. He thought maybe at prom he'd try to be prepared. It was far enough away that he didn't have to think about it. But Johnny had said people had sex or tried to in Jimmy's house during his parties. Did Johnny and Ali have sex in this house? Is that why Ali never invited him to come along? Because it'd be too difficult not to compare the two of them? Did he even want to have sex with Ali?

"Hey," Johnny said gently, arms breaking free from Daniel's hands. "You okay?"

"I didn't bring a condom," Daniel said, it burst out, it was embarrassing. But he was panicking. If she was ready he should be ready right? But he wasn't ready, or at least he didn't think he was ready. Not yet. He thought he'd have more time to figure it out, everything out.

Johnny flushed bright red, from his face to his ears, down his neck. It probably wasn't something to say to Johnny. To have this conversation with him, ever. But Daniel was freaking out. He breathed in and shut his eyes and breathed out, like how Mr. Miyagi taught him.

"I"

Daniel looked up at Johnny, he was struggling with something. It was probably just as hard to talk about. He lifted up one of his hands and ran it through his hair.

"There are...some..."

He seemed like he didn't want to say, like talking hurt him, he covered his eyes.

"In the bathrooms," he whispered.

He was pale, the redness had left, retreated somewhere and suddenly the door was opening and Dutch was there. He was grinning and Daniel watched his eyes travel between the two of them and fade and twist with a look of worry and concern. Daniel ducked past Johnny and Dutch and out of the closet and out of the room.

First he'd find Ali, he'd feel better when he found her. Maybe they could just dance today. Or have fun. He hurried through the halls.

The football players were gone, she wasn't in the kitchens, she wasn't dancing in the room where the music was coming from.

He found a window and yeah, there was her car, she was there.

He hurried to find her, going to the pool which was full and he watched the bodies moving in the water and she wasn't there.

He checked the fire pit, studying faces in the reflecting of the flames, he checked everywhere feeling panic well up in him again.

Why couldn't he find her?

He saw her friends.

They didn't even say hi to him.

He found the jacuzzi.

He spotted her hair and opened his mouth to say hello, ready to climb in with a joke on his lips about how hard she was to find or well *long time no see* or *what's a girl like you doing in a place like this* but as he stepped closer, quietly on the balls of his feet he saw her head was moving in a weird way.

She wasn't alone.

She was kissing someone, she was sitting in a guys lap, her fingers in his hair, his hands on the small of her back. She'd brought a bathing suit.

Daniel felt cold, took a step back, and another.

The guys eyes flicked open and he caught Daniel with a steady deep green gaze. He lifted a hand from her back and waved at Daniel. The college guy. The football player from UCLA.

Daniel turned and ran.

Bad at Beer Pong

Dutch wanted to know what happened, asked if Johnny was okay.

Johnny nodded, he wanted to be anywhere else.

Apparently, that wasn't enough, Dutch wanted more.

"I told him that after 4 drinks Ali gets...flirty, so he went off to find her," he said.

Dutch frowned.

"I think I'm going to just make rounds, enjoy the rest of the game," Johnny said pushing past and ducking into the hall.

He didn't want to hear what Dutch had to say.

He wandered around. He passed water to the ones too drunk, gave them snacks, aired out rooms that reeked of weed, cleaned up as he walked around. It helped to have something to do. Not thinking of how close Daniel had been to him, the concern of how panicked he'd looked, regretting what he'd said.

Of course, Ali and Daniel would have sex. Johnny just didn't want to know about it, didn't want to think about it.

Instead, he answered the door for the pizza and carried the heavy pile of boxes into the kitchen.

Bobby stumbled into the kitchen, hair mussed and lipstick on his lips like a smear, shirt a mess, and a different color of lipstick on his neck.

"Hey man, you okay?" Bobby asked.

"Yeah," Johnny said.

"Dutch said-"

"Damnit."

Bobby smiled slightly. "Listen, it's fine."

Johnny pushed at Bobby trying to direct him out of the room back to wherever he'd clearly been having a great night.

"Go do whatever, don't worry about me."

Bobby could stand his ground like a cement block when he wanted and he just grinned at Johnny. Clearly enjoying being an immovable object.

"Nah, dude we're sorry. We forgot that's how Ali gets when she drinks. Dutch said you looked like you'd seen a ghost, or some shit when he opened the door. What happened?"

Bobby pulled up a stool in the empty kitchen settling in like he wouldn't leave without an explanation.

Johnny sighed, no one else was around and Bobby was leaning forward, all ears, all active listening even though he looked ridiculous like Dutch had just pulled him out of an intense make-out session or probably, possibly something more.

"Dutch gave an excuse for why he shoved Daniel and me in the closet, the whole no girls going to touch me thing. So Daniel wanted to know why and so we started talking about Ali and that was such a bad idea and I-"

"Told him that after 4 drinks she starts making out with people and grabbing asses?"

"Not as crude, but yeah."

"So?"

"Well he panicked, he didn't have... a condom,"

"So not a problem," Bobby said leaning back with a shrug.

"So I told him where he could find some."

"YOU DUMBASS!" Bobby shouted, a look of horror on his face that looked so out of place.

He had lipstick on his ear Johnny realized and on his chest where the shirt was buttoned all wrong and showed the skin underneath. They were all different colors and Johnny wondered what sort of life Bobby lived when Johnny wasn't around.

Johnny ducked his head.

"I know."

"You fucker, you cockblocked yourself in like the worst possible way. You pushed them together, who fucking pushes the person they like into the arms of someone else?" Bobby asked burying his head in his hands.

"I know okay? Just, I'm fine okay. I'm fucking fine."

"Idiot," Bobby said shaking his head.

"Just go back to your orgy or whatever," Johnny said kicking at the stool Bobby was on. "I'm not in the mood for one of your lectures, okay?"

Bobby laughed. "Johnny, how do you always do this shit to yourself?"

"Bobby," Johnny growled. "Piss off okay?"

Bobby slipped off of the stool, hands up, and picked up one of the boxes. "Okay okay, but damn dude. Here we thought we were making some good progress and you just put us back so much."

Johnny threw one of the white plastic pieces that came with the pizzas at Bobby who quickly left the room. He buried his head in his hands with a groan.

He knew he messed up, but he also didn't know how to have avoided that situation. He couldn't think of a different way he would've talked to Daniel. He would've felt guilty holding that information in.

He went back on his rounds, letting people know pizza had arrived and where to find it. He tried not to think of Daniel, tried to not think of Ali.

The guys found him, slowly throughout the night, eyes full of concern. Bobby had apparently relayed his fuck up amongst them, so they kept checking on him.

It was pissing him off. He was *fine*.

Tommy asked if he wanted to drink, offering to swap out as designated sober person.

Johnny declined.

He'd rather not be drunk and upset, who knows what he'd do then? He feared he might hunt for them through the party, try to pull them apart, he might get into a fight, or make things worse.

No, it was better to be sober and miserable.

He cleaned up abandoned drinks, listened to people talk, moved around easily, and then he noticed something out of the corner of his eye, something that made him pause.

Daniel was sitting by himself on the steps to go upstairs and Johnny thought about passing him, ignoring him. He didn't want to hear about their time together. But he couldn't. He knelt down instead.

If he had to hear about their time together, well so be it. His heart was pounding. He didn't know what to say or what to do.

"Hey," Johnny said softly.

Daniel's head lulled a bit as he lifted his head up and Johnny got the smell of alcohol. Daniel reeked of it.

"Heeeeyyyyyyyy," Daniel said. "Guess what?"

"What?" Johnny asked.

"I learned how to play beer pong! And!"

"And?"

"I learned I *suck* at beer pong!" Daniel said with a laugh.

"Have you eaten?" Johnny asked.

Daniel shook his head.

Johnny carefully coaxed Daniel to his feet. Daniel swayed and leaned heavily against him. Johnny deposited him on a stool in the kitchen. The one Bobby had been in earlier.

Johnny filled a glass with water and a plate full of pizza and set it in front of Daniel. Daniel ate hurriedly.

"Slow down," Johnny said gently.

Daniel laughed. "*I'm* too slow."

His laugh was bitter and then into the third slice tears started rolling down his face.

"Hey," Johnny said sitting down next to him. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Daniel shook his head, shoving more pizza into his mouth, brushing tears away with the back of his hand, cheeks full of pizza like a chipmunk trying to save things for later. He inhaled more pizza, downed the water, and wiped his hands off on the napkins then looked around at the teens slowly coming in to grab more pizza, the laughter, and the conversation.

He grabbed Johnny's hand and pulled him along as he slid off the stool and away.

Johnny followed, unsure of where they were going. He followed Daniel down the hall and up the stairs.

Daniel kept trying doors, they were mostly locked. A closet opened and Daniel nodded, it seemed to be what he wanted and he pushed Johnny in and closed the door behind him.

It was one of the bigger closets, one that stored foldable chairs and Daniel used one to lock the door in place so no one could open it from the outside. He collapsed onto the floor of the closet pulling Johnny down with him.

Johnny sat with his legs crossed and Daniel sat across from him, sitting close and resting his knees over Johnny's. He buried his head in his hands and breathed, tried to breathe.

Johnny reached out and patted Daniel's shoulder, it always helped with sad drunken teens.

"It's okay," Johnny said softly. "Whatever happened, it's okay."

"I found Ali," Daniel said, head lowered.

"Yeah?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah," Daniel said quietly.

The only tell that he was crying again was the sparkle of tears falling, the brief moment the light hit them before they disappeared into the carpet.

"She was in the jacuzzi, the hot tub, with one of the UCLA guys."

Johnny felt his heart sink, a chill run up his spine.

"Oh," he said.

"Johnny," Daniel whispered looking up at him, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Am I just a fool? Was she using me? Just something to make you jealous? A pitstop between you and some other buff guy? Was it all some elaborate joke? A palette cleanser? A rebound? I feel like such an idiot," Daniel said rubbing his eyes.

Johnny gently cupped Daniel's face in his hands, brushing away tears. "No."

Daniel laughed, it was watery. "You don't know that."

Johnny let his hands drop, it had probably been too much. "Maybe not all of it, but your not an idiot or a fool. I'm sorry that this happened, that she-"

"Kissed another guy? Some football player? I mean, she had you for two years. How was I supposed to compete with someone as pretty as you?"

Johnny flushed, no one had ever called him pretty before. Anyone else and it would've been a fight.

Daniel surged forward hands coming to the side of Johnny's face. His lips pressed against Johnny's.

Surprised Johnny tried to speak but Daniel took it as an invitation and his tongue was suddenly in Johnny's mouth, filling it with a taste of beer and pizza, exploring, almost as hungry as when he'd demolished the plate Johnny had given him. Like Johnny was something else he needed.

His other hand was hitching Johnny's shirt up, trailing up his stomach.

Johnny tensed and Daniel's fingers trailed up abs to splay his palm against Johnny's pec and squeezed.

Johnny pushed Daniel away.

Daniel struggled towards him, practically crawling into his lap, his knee dangerously too close.

"Daniel," Johnny whispered. He tried cracking a smile, but his heart was pounding in his ears. "I normally don't let someone feel me up until like the 5th date."

Daniel frowned at this.

Johnny hurried to continue. It was a joke. He was trying to keep this light, to be focused. He wanted to let Daniel go, see what he did, but he also knew Daniel was drunk and hurt and this was a mistake and Daniel would regret it.

"I also don't let drunk people get too far. I'd rather people remember they kiss me, you know?"

Oh god. Daniel was practically pouting.

"Did you break up with Ali?" Johnny asked gently.

"No," Daniel said, surly like a toddler.

"Then this shop is closed," Johnny said.

He was scared that Daniel would get up and run, embarrassed over his mistake. He didn't want to not encourage it, the kiss, the warm hands on his skin that sent a shiver down his spine. But he had a rule, he didn't make out with drunk people unless they were already dating, and even then he pissed Ali off so many times because of it. He also didn't help people cheat. Even if it was in revenge. Even though he technically forced a kiss on Ali, as his own revenge on both of them. He'd regretted it almost immediately. Deserved the punch.

Johnny moved carefully, pulling Daniel into a hug and rubbing his back. He didn't want Daniel to think of him as a drunken mistake, didn't want to be a desperate response to a broken heart. Even if he wanted everything that was happening.

Daniel started crying again but buried his head in Johnny's shirt which he managed to pull back down.

"Have you ever had alcohol before?" Johnny asked quietly after a while. After the shaking of Daniel's shoulders stilled.

Daniel rolled his head slightly. "Wine."

"Yeah? What all did you have tonight?"

"Beer, just lots of beer."

"Mrs. LaRusso okay with you drinking?"

"Yeah, she gave me money for a taxi," Daniel murmured into Johnny's chest.

"I'll give you a ride home," Johnny said.

Daniel's fingers curled into Johnny's shirt, gripping it tightly into his fist. "I don't...I don't want to see her. I can't go home before her. I can't Johnny... I just can't."

Johnny lifted his hand to look at the watch on his wrist. He knew Ali well, knew her schedule, the way she worked. Her parents were strict about what time she had to be home. They had an hour until her curfew. If she drank one of her friends usually drove her car home and spent the night.

"Okay," Johnny said. "I'll take you home after her curfew."

Daniel nodded and his breathing calmed and slowed and Johnny looked down. Daniel's eyes were shut. He'd fallen asleep.

Johnny wanted to laugh. How ridiculous. How *absolutely* ridiculous. How was this Johnny's life? Stuck in a closet with Daniel, who was curled up in his arms fast asleep. There had to be a joke in there somewhere. If Dutch found out, he'd know the joke. He'd make it immediately and Johnny would have to hit him. Even if it was witty.

Johnny leaned his head back against the wall. It was nice, the weight of Daniel against him.

Johnny listened to the party dissipate. The music being turned off, the sound of cars leaving the drive, the loud sounds of conversation dwindling, of bedroom doors being opened as college kids made their way to the guest rooms.

He heard Jimmy outside of the closet talking to Tommy.

"Have you seen Johnny in a while?"

"No, not for a couple of hours."

"Think he's moping somewhere?"

"I don't know. I mean I didn't see Ali and Daniel. I kind of was expecting to find them making out in some corner somewhere but Ali's cars gone and that yellow banana boat is still in the drive."

"Huh, and the Avanti is still here?"

"Yeah."

"Hope they didn't get into a fight."

"Ali and Daniel or Johnny and Daniel?"

"Seriously? Which one do you think I'd actually care about?

"Just checking. You think they might've gotten into a fight?"

"If Johnny got too jealous, maybe. He's fucking hopeless man. Who cockblocks themselves like that? He's such a dumbass."

"Yeah well, he's *our* dumbass."

He heard Jimmy laugh and Tommy joined in. "Oh, I hope he's not in some corner totally broken-hearted. Why the hell is your house so big?"

"Yeah, right? The fact he has keys makes this a fucking nightmare. Like looking for a needle in a haystack. A *sad* blonde needle."

Johnny heard their footsteps retreat. Ali was gone. He gently patted Daniel's shoulder.

"Daniel, time to go home," he said softly.

Daniel didn't wake just tried to bury his face. Johnny frowned, trying to figure out logistics.

He slipped his arm under Daniel's legs and adjusted him, standing and taking Daniel with him, carrying him gently in his arms. He kicked the chair away from the door and then leaned against it, shifting Daniel in his arms. He managed to free a hand to push the door open and carefully readjusted his grip heading out into the hall.

Daniel was light, it was almost as easy as he thought it'd be. He walked down the stairs, moving carefully. Daniel's head was leaning against him, eyes still closed.

He managed to get to the front door without running into anyone.

Classmates were passed out around the open rooms, sleeping on the floor, on the couches.

He pushed the front door open and made his way to the Avanti, carefully lifting Daniel over the door and into the passenger seat, glad he'd kept the top down. He got into the driver's seat and then leaned over to buckle Daniel in.

The drive to Reseda and South Seas was peaceful, quiet. Daniel slept the whole way.

He carried Daniel through the gate and past the pool and up to the second floor and knocked gently on apartment 20 hoping it wasn't too late, hoping that Mrs. LaRusso was the type of mom he thought she was. The kind who stayed up waiting, worried but also ready to smile and welcome her son home.

Sure enough, the door swung open and a look of surprise and shock and concern quickly flooded her features.

"He's okay," Johnny said quickly, whispering. "Just asleep. He drank, played beer pong and I don't know how much he drank but he passed out. Where's his bed?"

Mrs. LaRusso quickly moved out of the way so Johnny could carry Daniel into the apartment.

"You know, his father wasn't able to hold his booze either. Started falling asleep on me at bars," she said with a soft laugh shutting the door behind Johnny and then hurrying to lead Johnny to Daniel's room.

Johnny set him down gently, noting the glass of water and the aspirin already set out. Mrs. LaRusso was ready for whatever came tomorrow.

He untied Daniel's shoes taking them off and setting them on the floor before carefully pulling the bedding aside and covering Daniel. After a moment he gently guided Daniel onto his side, just in case, and pulled a trash can closer before standing.

Mrs. LaRusso was watching him with a soft smile.

"Good party?" Mrs. LaRusso asked walking with Johnny into the kitchen.

"Kind of. I'm not sure if Daniel had a good time or not. I think, maybe... don't ask about Ali, there were... some problems," Johnny said softly.

Mrs. LaRusso frowned, worry etching into her brow. She looked like she was about to launch into a bunch of questions.

"It's not my place," Johnny said. "He's okay, physically, he ate pizza, drank water, and tomorrow if he calls the number he gave you then I

can come back and get him so he can get his car. If he's not feeling well enough, we'll figure something out. I'm spending the night at Jimmy's so, just let him know okay?"

Mrs. LaRusso stepped close to Johnny and he stiffed but her arms wrapped around him in a hug. He'd expected a slap, he didn't know why he had. It felt silly after she hugged him to think that'd happen, but it was his instinct. To prepare to be hit.

"Thank you," Mrs. LaRusso said. "For taking such good care of him, for watching over him, bringing him home."

"Of course Mrs. LaRusso," Johnny said.

She pulled away from him and he moved towards the door. "Have a good evening Mrs. LaRusso."

He slipped out of the warm apartment and back out to his car. The ride back was quiet but lonelier without Daniel asleep next to him.

He parked and went into Jimmy's home. He beelined to the kitchen scooping up a piece of pizza and eating it.

He thought he'd eaten but now his stomach was growling. The pizza was cold, but it was still good.

"Where the hell have you been?" Bobby asked.

Johnny turned and saw them all. His friend's faces an array of emotion, relief, anger, worry, and concern.

"Took Daniel home," Johnny said around his pizza.

"Why do you hurt yourself like this?" Tommy asked taking a seat next to him.

Johnny shrugged. "He was drunk."

Bobby blinked in surprise, Jimmy's mouth hung open and Dutch burst into laughter.

"Daniel LaRusso, drunk? What did Mom LaRusso say?" Dutch asked.

"She expected it," Johnny said with a shrug. "Already had water and aspirin waiting on his bedside table."

"Wish my family was that cool," Tommy murmured.

"What'd he drink? I never saw him around the keg," Jimmy asked.

"Beer pong," Johnny said. "Apparently."

"Glad he had fun, but you didn't," Bobby said poking Johnny in the chest. "The whole point of all this is that we and I stress *we* all have a fucking fantastic rest of our senior year."

"Sorry we can't all win a seat in an orgy," Johnny said swatting his hand. "Not my type of thing anyway."

Bobby flushed lightly. "It *wasn't* an orgy, just a genius game the college girls brought, spin the bottle meets twister. It was amazing."

"How'd I miss that?" Dutch asked pouting.

Bobby laughed. "Did you seriously not notice what I was doing when you slammed the door all panicked calling my name?"

Dutch folded his arms across his chest. "Well damn."

"If you all don't mind, I'm going to crash," Johnny said pushing himself up. "I'm fine, don't worry."

He knew if he told them everything that happened that night they'd probably yell at him some more, probably would feel better, but it wasn't his place to tell them what Ali did, wasn't his place to tell them what Ali and Daniel didn't do, and he really didn't kiss and tell.

Besides he'd have to explain to them why he pushed Daniel off of him and they'd chew him out for it.

It wasn't any of their business.

He climbed the stairs up to the room that he always stayed in at Jimmy's and unlocked the door and pushed it open.

His bonsai sat safely on the bedside table. He closed the door behind him and locked it.

He kicked off his shoes and padded across the room to the en suite bathroom and stripped to shower. He paused catching sight of himself in the mirror.

Nothing about him gave away that Daniel had kissed him, there were no marks on his chest, just the memory of the feeling.

He stepped into the shower enjoying the warmth on his skin.

He hated that Ali had made Daniel cry, hurt him so bad that he'd turned straight to drinking. He hated that he was the one who told Daniel about where to find Ali and how Ali was when she drank. It wouldn't have changed that she cheated on Daniel with a UCLA football player, but maybe it would've saved him the heartache of stumbling upon it. Of having to see it with his own eyes.

He wanted to find Ali and demand to know what she was thinking, but she was still avoiding him, still refusing to talk to him.

It just wasn't fair to Daniel, after everything.

He took a deep breath breathing in steam and sighed.

What happened next was up to Daniel and Ali. As much as he wanted to interfere it wasn't his place. All he could do was be there for Daniel.

He stepped out and dried off and brushed his teeth.

His first kiss with Daniel was so bittersweet. He hadn't really expected it to ever happen, but for it to happen because Daniel was drunk and hurt felt worse. He'd keep it to himself. There was a chance Daniel wouldn't remember or would be too embarrassed to even talk about it, so Johnny wouldn't press it.

He changed and curled up in the bed with a sigh. It'd felt nice, Daniel gripping him tightly, kissing him like that, passionately a little desperate and needy.

It'd been such a Daniel kiss, seeing an opening and taking it.

Johnny picked up the other pillow on the bed and covered his face in it.

He was screwed. There was no hiding it from himself anymore. He really liked Daniel. Wanted to kiss him more, it was unfair to get a taste like that, a glimpse of what could be, or worse, hope. Hope that Daniel liked him, more than a friend which he wasn't even sure they were yet, enough to want to kiss Johnny and not just because he happened to be there when Daniel was drunk and upset.

Nothing but Breath

Daniel's mouth felt like something had crawled into it and died. His teeth felt fuzzy and his tongue was dry. His head was pounding and he thought he heard a sound when he opened his eyes, they hurt. He wondered where he was, then saw his stuff, his room.

He pushed himself up slowly. He didn't remember coming home. He took the water and the aspirin, threw the aspirin into his mouth, and drank the whole glass of water. It helped.

He made his way to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. He looked like hell, still wearing last night's clothes but they were all wrinkled and messed up from sleeping in them, hair was sticking up, eyes looking bruised, but not nearly as bad as when he'd gotten a black eye.

The light was too bright and he squinted. He looked miserable. He washed his hands and brushed his teeth then walked out into the kitchen.

"Hey! Good morning!" his mother said and he winced.

Her voice was too loud, too chipper. His hand went to his head with a groan.

She laughed, directing him to sit. She was making eggs and toast she set a plate with some orange juice in front of him and then poured him a cup of coffee.

He looked at the food and felt sick.

"I know, looks bad, but you got to eat," she said.

"How'd I get home?" Daniel asked.

"Johnny brought you home," she said.

Johnny.

Daniel cursed putting his head in his hands.

He'd kissed Johnny.

He'd ran stubbornly and drunkenly through first and second base. He

hadn't kept his hands to himself, if Johnny hadn't pushed him off who knows what he would've tried to do.

He felt his face heat up, his heart pounding.

He probably would've tried to steal third.

He remembered seeing Johnny blush and he had just gone for it, he couldn't believe he'd done that. He was a menace to society.

Why hadn't Johnny hit him? Why hadn't Johnny pushed Daniel off and just left him alone in the closet to be miserable by himself?

He'd tasted like mint and it'd been so soothing, Daniel hadn't wanted to stop, even when Johnny had pushed him away.

He didn't remember leaving the closet and he looked up at his mother.

She was watching him curiously.

Daniel had to ask.

"Did he look...upset? Like pissed? Mad at me?"

"He said you played beer pong and fell asleep, so he carried you here. He tucked you in," she laughed softly. "No way he was mad at you."

Daniel flushed darker burying his face in his hands again. How was he going to face Johnny?

"Oh, he said he's at Jimmy's today, so when you want the Ford he can come get you and take you back so you can drive it back. If you're feeling up for it," she said motioning to the piece of paper Jimmy had given Daniel that was pinned to the fridge. "Did you have fun?" she asked quietly like she was worried.

"I," Daniel paused and sighed, he didn't want to worry her. "It was fun. I played charades with Johnny and some kids from school and then beer pong, which I'm not good at," he laughed softly.

It hadn't been a totally awful night. It had been fun. It'd just been overshadowed. He didn't want to cry more. He didn't want to feel the burn of shame at throwing himself at Johnny. Or on Johnny.

"Did Johnny say anything else?"

"Said you ate pizza and drank water, so not to be too worried," Mrs.

LaRusso smiled softly. "Despite being a terror for nearly six months, he's turned out to be a really nice kid."

"Yeah," Daniel said picking at his egg. It was runny, the way he liked it but watching the yolk spill onto his plate made him feel nauseous. He picked up his toast and took a bite of that instead.

"You know if I'd had a Johnny in my life when your Dad and I were out partying life would've been so much easier," she said with a laugh.

Daniel looked up surprised. He drank his juice and dipped his toast in the yolk. He didn't want to waste his mother's cooking even if it made his stomach turn. Maybe if he focused on her and not the food it'd help.

"Your Dad always fell asleep at the bar if we stayed out too late or if we drank too much. He'd just pass out. I'd have to drag him out." Her eyes were sparkling at the memory. "He was always so damn heavy, I always joked that I needed to work out more before we'd go out. Seems like you have similar drinking habits."

Daniel felt stinging in his eyes. It wasn't like they didn't talk about Dad, but it still always hurt. There was so much they didn't know. So much he'd never know.

He'd never know that Daniel won a karate tournament.

He'd never meet Mr. Miyagi, but he would've liked Mr. Miyagi.

He'd never meet Ali, he'd never give him advice about what to do next because Ali had kissed someone else and Daniel had kissed Johnny.

He'd never help Daniel untangle his feelings.

He'd never be at their kitchen table laughing at what Ma said, teasing her back about her drinking habits. He'd never know the similarities between the two of them. Between father and son.

Tears fell down Daniel's cheeks and Mrs. LaRusso smiled, tears running down her cheeks too.

She hugged him and he breathed in her perfume and hairspray.

After a while, he pulled away and she returned to her seat, brushing tears from his face. He turned to his breakfast, determined to eat it.

The coffee helped more than he expected. When he was done he smiled at her.

"Thanks Ma. I think I'm going to go see if Mr. Miyagi's around. And I'll uh decide what to do about the Ford."

She nodded but didn't press him about anything and he felt relieved. He loved his mother but telling her about Ali, about Johnny, it just felt wrong. She loved Ali or thought he did and had only just started liking Johnny. He didn't want to change any of that.

He needed to think and Mr. Miyagi's advice hadn't sent him down the wrong path yet. He found his shoes, shoved his feet in them, and then headed down to Mr. Miyagi's workshop.

The wooden chimes clanging as he pushed open the screen door. Mr. Miyagi was fixing something at his desk and Daniel felt relieved to see him.

Daniel sat down in one of the stools nearby. After a while, Mr. Miyagi set the thing down and looked at Daniel.

"Daniel-san okay?" he asked.

There was worry in his tone, concern in his eyes and Daniel felt stricken. He'd cried so much last night and this morning and it felt like the waterworks were too much and he needed to reign it in. He wanted this to be a smart conversation, a logical one, not filled with his tears.

"Yeah, kind of, sort of, I guess not," Daniel said softly with a frown.

"Party go bad? Boys start a fight?" Mr. Miyagi asked.

Daniel shook his head. "No, we played games and they were nice to me, welcoming."

He laughed, it sounded bizarre to say it out loud. Who'd have thought the ex-cobras would be in the same place as him without a fight or some torture happening.

"Have fun with Ali-san?"

Daniel looked away from Mr. Miyagi's searching eyes, trying to find the source of Daniel's pain and striking straight to the point.

He took a deep breath.

"She uh, I didn't get to talk to her. I found her, but she was kissing a UCLA football guy."

Saying it aloud switched something, saying it to Mr. Miyagi in the light of morning pissed him off. After everything, they'd been through. After all the shit Daniel had had to deal with. He laughed bitterly.

"I think I know why she never invited me to any of these parties before. Why her friends wouldn't talk to me. Why we sat on our own and not with them. They never made an effort. Heck, Johnny's friends, those ex-cobras have made more of an effort to make me feel welcome at school than my girlfriend's friends. I can't believe it. I'm just a detour, an experiment for her, she wanted to see what it was like dating someone who isn't built like a Greek or Roman statue made of marble, wanted to know what it was like to date a loser, someone without the fancy car or the big house. She wanted to date someone from the other side of the tracks, from Reseda just probably for points or something. It was probably pity, she probably didn't even like me. Maybe she dated me because I got my butt kicked my first night here and lost the friends I'd started to make almost straight out of the gate because of her. Felt like she owed me but didn't actually want to be with me, so she's probably been going to these parties and kissing other guys and-"

"Daniel-san!" Mr. Miyagi said stiffly.

And the words in Daniel's throat on his tongue died before they reached his lips.

"Breathe."

Daniel took a deep breath.

"Has Daniel-san talked to her?"

Daniel shook his head.

"Daniel-san must decide, whether the relationship can make it over this or not. Must decide whether it's worth it to Daniel-san or not. But **now** Daniel-san too upset. Too hurt. Like explosion will hurt both, will make things worse."

Mr. Miyagi turned and picked up one of the bonsai and set it down closer to Daniel. "This Bonsai nearly die. Take a while to figure out what the problem was. Very sick. No other bonsai sick."

"What was wrong with it?" Daniel asked, the bonsai looked fine, healthy.

"Roots were sick," Mr. Miyagi said nose wrinkling with a deep frown. "Making bonsai sick. Bonsai gets its strength from roots, when roots are sick, when something is attacking the roots, when its poisoned, tree can't survive. Have to cut loose the dead roots so tree could focus on what was healthy and heal and flourish. Daniel-san must decide what is unsalvageable. Or what is. What will help Daniel-san flourish. Daniel-san must know what he wants."

Daniel looked at the tree, studying it. If he'd been asked by someone which bonsai had nearly died he wouldn't have been able to pick this one out. But he thought of the roots, probably damaged, probably different than the other bonsais.

"Thanks Mr. Miyagi," Daniel said.

Mr. Miyagi turned and then paused."Daniel-san, remember, high school almost over. Soon will be in past. Soon will graduate and everyone will move on, change. Important to do things Daniel-san wants to do. High school not last forever."

Daniel smiled softly. It was weird to realize that Mr. Miyagi and the ex-cobra's had the same thought process. The same belief.

Now though he just had to figure out how to go get his car.

Mr. Miyagi looked back at him and raised an eyebrow, waiting.

"Johnny brought me home, I..."

His mother was okay with him drinking, he'd had sake with Mr. Miyagi, but admitting he'd drank until he passed out felt embarrassing to admit to him. But he also didn't lie to Mr. Miyagi.

"drank a bit much. So I have to go back to get the Ford. Feels a little awkward to call Johnny to come back and get me."

Not just because he'd have to figure out what to say after trying to steal as many bases as Johnny would let him.

He felt his face warm and he turned to the bonsai.

"Johnny-san offer?"

"Yes, but-"

"Johnny-san not offer if not want to do."

Mr. Miyagi made it sound so easy, so simple. Talking about Ali was one thing. Talking about Johnny was another. He couldn't tell Mr. Miyagi what he did.

So he just said, "Yeah, I guess I'll go make a call then."

"Tell Johnny-san if he want, have plenty to do here," Mr. Miyagi said with a smile.

Daniel laughed. "Okay, Mr. Miyagi."

He pushed himself off the stool and left. He'd have to face Johnny eventually and maybe being stuck in the Avanti with him would give him enough time to think of something, and it'd be better than running into him awkwardly at school.

He'd also have to talk to Ali.

He didn't know how to handle that.

Jimmy answered the phone all professional-like, a voice that took Daniel half a second to place even despite introducing itself as Jimmy.

"Uh...it's Daniel, Daniel LaRusso," he felt like an idiot.

He'd been so nervous that Johnny would answer, thought for sure Johnny would.

"I left my car there. Ma told me Johnny said to call..." Daniel swallowed, his fingers curling up in the phone cord.

What if Johnny had told them?

"Oh yeah, the banana boat's still in the drive. Did you leave your keys?" Jimmy asked.

Daniel frowned and patted his pockets, his keys were still there, along with his wallet.

"Uh, no I've got them here."

"Okay, I'll go tell Johnny and see if he'll drive out to get you and bring you back. Got a number for me to call you back at?" Jimmy asked.

Daniel listed off the numbers for the apartment number and he listened to Jimmy repeat it back.

"Yeah that's right."

"Cool, talk to you later," Jimmy said and hung up.

Daniel hung the phone up feeling queasy. He wondered if he should call Ali and set something up. To meet her somewhere. Talk about it. But he felt a flash of anger and sighed. Thinking about Ali made him angry, frustrated, hurt. He wasn't ready to confront her about it yet. To try and figure out what he needed to do, to thrive like Mr. Miyagi said.

The phone rang and he jumped, scrambling to grab it.

"LaRusso household, Daniel speaking," he squeaked.

"Hey."

It was Johnny and his voice sounded different on the phone, deeper. Daniel's heart sputtered in his chest.

"You want me to come get you? Take about 20 minutes. That good?"

"Yeah...yes, that'd be good...great...uh...see you then?"

Daniel's tongue felt heavy in his mouth, unwieldy. The words didn't come out as smoothly as he wanted.

"Okay. See you then. Bye."

There was a click and Daniel held the phone to his chest. Fuck. That was just a damn phone call. His heart was racing. The sound of Johnny's voice in his ear had made the hair on the back of his neck raise and Daniel didn't know what to do with that. Twenty minutes. He didn't know if he could calm down in twenty minutes.

"You okay?" his mother asked.

"Yes," he squeaked putting the phone back.

He cleared his throat, tried to calm down.

"Johnny's coming in twenty minutes to take me."

Oh god, that sounded wrong, why did everything sound wrong, like

some euphemism?

"Uh...back to...get my car."

"Okay, well drive carefully. I'm going to the store. Need anything?" she asked hoisting her purse over her shoulder and setting some sunglasses on her face.

"No, thank you," Daniel managed.

She went to the door and paused. "Your taxi money, offer it to him as gas money or something for coming out of his way so much. Or buy him lunch."

"Yes Ma," Daniel said.

She nodded, pleased, and left.

Daniel sunk to the floor. He needed to think. He had twenty minutes. What would he say to Johnny?

Hey there, sorry I jumped you, I was drunk.

No. Made it seem like he jumped anyone when he was drunk...maybe he did, he didn't know he didn't drink that much usually. He felt horror run through him. What if that was who he was when he was drunk? Someone who jumped people until he got tired and just passed out? What if he was like Ali?

No drinking with strangers. Not until he knew for sure.

Part of him whispered that it was because it was Johnny and it was ridiculous to think otherwise. The way his ears turned pink, how it all contrasted with his blue eyes, the way he'd looked at Daniel, shocked enough that his lips had parted.

All that focus on Daniel, listening to everything he had to say, not paying attention to anything else. Daniel wanted more of that.

He groaned, this was not going where it needed to. He needed a plan, not to just explore his memories and actions. He figured he needed to apologize.

Step one, apologize.

For what though?

Sorry, you had to come all the way out here again. Sorry, I'm a messy drunk, thank you for everything.

That felt safer.

He'd skip past the drunken kiss and fondling, the assault and groping.

Daniel frowned. Johnny was coming to get him.

If he was pissed he'd say so. If he was upset he'd say so. Right?

Johnny *hadn't* when Daniel had pushed him down into the sand and tried to start a fight.

He *hadn't* when Daniel had scratched him. Hadn't when he was mean to him.

Why would Johnny make his feelings known now? He held it all in.

He let Daniel get away with too much.

But he had stopped Daniel. Had put distance between them, and then held him while he cried.

So there were boundaries.

If Daniel kissed him today would he push him away again? Did Daniel want to kiss him again? Yes. Very much so. Damn.

He'd have to deal with Ali first.

Step 1 apologize to Johnny, thank Johnny, buy him lunch or pay for gas, tell him Mr. Miyagi is at South Seas Apartment and working this weekend if he wants to come by.

Step 2 Ali.

Daniel wanted to call Ali and break up with her over the phone.

He wanted to ask her why she wasted both of their time, why she'd even bothered with him if she hadn't been interested.

Maybe he should blame Freddy instead. Freddy who knew Ali was from the *hills*, who had told him to make a move. Pushed him to make a move on Ali.

Freddy and his friends who he thought would be his friends only for

them to ditch him as soon as Johnny kicked his ass. Who avoided him at school because of it. He remembered that night so clearly, teaching her how to juggle the ball, and then when she was done with him kicking the ball and brushing her hands against one another like she'd had enough, like she was brushing him off.

Why hadn't he taken that hint and just let it go, left her alone?

Why'd he come back like a moth to the flame when the bikes came roaring in? Was it because he saw his new friends walking over? That he felt like it was safe because they all seemed to know each other?

He remembered every time he hit the sand Freddy hauling him back up, pushing him back towards Johnny like he and his friends were ready to watch a fight.

He remembered being spurred on, furious that Johnny was making him look like a fool.

If he'd known that for Ali that radio was probably one of fifty, that she could've replaced it so easily with her allowance that her cries of "You broke my radio" wasn't the same as when Daniel's bike was broken.

He remembered breathing in sand, coughing it off of his lips, and the way his new friends just ditched him because he wasn't strong enough? Because a kid like him, new into town couldn't take on a two-time karate champion? It was unfair. It'd been so stupid, and the fact they all knew made him furious.

Was it because he'd done a karate kick on the entrance door that Freddy thought Daniel was some karate master and could take Johnny? And then what? Was disappointed he couldn't? He'd come to play soccer and hang out, not get into fights.

Daniel's hands curled into fists.

Those six months were all unfair. Unfair that he'd been friendless, bullied, harrassed all because of a misunderstanding. Because Daniel and Johnny's tempers had flared and they'd been pushed into a fight for no reason.

Maybe it wasn't all Ali's fault. She just hadn't helped.

There was a knock at the door and Daniel got up, walking over and pulling the door open. Johnny stood there in his red jacket and jeans, a white shirt underneath, and sunglasses. He looked at ease. Seeing

him there pissed him off.

This could've been a friendship earlier. They didn't have to fight. They didn't have to start off on such an abysmally wrong foot.

Maybe Johnny still would've been a dick, but maybe it wouldn't have been so bad. Maybe things could've been better.

"You okay?" Johnny asked.

Daniel sighed, coming out and pulling the door shut behind him.

"Just thinking. Pissed everyone seemed to egg us on to fight from the start. You know?"

"Yeah," Johnny said softly, following him down the steps, past the old lady and her dog. Daniel stopped, turning, and saw that Johnny had stopped to give the dog a treat. The dog licked his hand and he smiled softly.

"You boys hang out a lot now huh?" the older woman asked. "Glad you've got some friends Jersey."

Daniel frowned.

"The other ones you had," she continued, and shook her head, "Weren't so good. That other punk and his friends."

"Uh, yeah," Daniel said. "We were friends for like a day."

"Good," she said nodding and looking at Johnny. "You've upgraded. He always brings treats when he's here. Such a good kid."

Johnny stood looking a little uneasy, caught off guard by the praise.

Daniel grinned and hooked his arm through Johnny's, "Have a good day ma'am," he said pulling Johnny along and out the gate to the red Avanti that glistened in the sunlight.

He let go of Johnny immediately even though he didn't want to.

Rock blasted from the radio and Johnny quickly turned down the volume as Daniel sank into the seat he was beginning to think of as his. He liked being in the Avanti. He liked how comforting it had become. Like he was safe here in Johnny's car.

Something cold was pressed into his chest and Daniel looked down.

Johnny was offering him a bottle of water. He took it and looked at Johnny, his expression unreadable behind the sunglasses.

"How's your head?" Johnny asked pulling away from the curb, hands dancing over the steering wheel and Daniel had to stomp down his thoughts about those hands.

"Better than I when I woke up," Daniel said twisting the cap and drinking, touched that Johnny had brought him water, had thought of him.

Daniel looked out at the city as they passed then sighed. He couldn't put it off forever, even though he wanted to, even though just being in the Avanti had relaxed some of the tension. Seeing Johnny at ease, or as at ease as he'd ever seen him, seeing him in person again just helped. He turned his head, watching the wind whip blonde hair from Johnny's forehead.

"Thank you, for coming to get me, I know it's out of the way," Daniel began.

"It's okay, I wouldn't have offered if it wasn't," Johnny said. "Besides, gets me out of cleaning duty."

"Is it bad?" Daniel asked.

He hadn't thought about the mess a high school party could cause, but he remembered seeing all the trash, remembered seeing how often people spilled their drinks, dropped snacks, and cringed. He was pretty sure he'd seen pizza floating in the pool.

"They were trying to wake people up and get them out the door when I left. Bobby was trying to stop Dutch from sweeping them out with a broom. I think Bobby wrested the broom away from Dutch and told him to go vacuum somewhere but knowing Dutch he's going to stick the vacuum to people's faces to wake them up. I'm sure a fight broke out."

Daniel laughed. "I'm glad you took me home then. Wouldn't want to wake up to Dutch wielding a vacuum."

"I didn't want your mother to worry," Johnny said.

Daniel looked at him, studying him.

"I didn't have your number with me so I couldn't call."

"If you had, would you have left me to be woken up by Dutch?" Daniel asked amused.

"No," Johnny said. "I would've put you in one of the guest rooms."

Daniel was grateful Johnny wasn't looking because his face was probably too obvious. His face felt hot and he looked out at the palm trees towering along the sides of the street. He drank the water. He was touched. He thought only special guests got guest rooms. He thought his classmates just passed out where they fell down. Which would've meant Johnny would've left him in the closet, but no, Johnny would've tucked him in in some bedroom to be woken up with a headache when the cleaning began. But instead, he took Daniel home.

"I'm sorry," Daniel said, hands tightening around the water bottle. "You spent so much time taking care of me, running me home and back, did you get to have any fun?"

"I had fun," Johnny said slowly, carefully. "And it's fine. You're not that much trouble." He paused and his lip quirked into a smirk. "Most of the time."

He was being playful. Daniel relaxed a bit. He was teasing, but there wasn't any malice in it. The music floated up and Daniel sunk his head into the headrest and listened on the way back to the hills, to Jimmy's mansion. Most of the cars were gone, except for the yellow Ford and a few others. The door burst open and Tommy came running up to the Avanti.

"Everything okay?" Johnny asked.

"Dude, people are disgusting," Tommy said. "It's totally unfair that you got to go get LaRusso. You should've seen the shit we've found. LaRusso, take me with you when you leave."

Daniel laughed and Johnny shook his head pushing the door open. "I've helped clean up before, there's no way it's worse. Someone vomited in the Ming vase at one of these, remember?"

Tommy wrinkled his nose with a frown. "Don't remind me. But do remind me why we clean the place rather than let the staff do it?"

"Because we're Jimmy's friends, and you had fun last night right?" Johnny asked.

Tommy frowned. "Not as much fun as Bobby, but yeah."

"Bobby wins the award for best night, hands down. It was like he channeled Dionysus."

"What did Bobby do?" Daniel asked.

"He played almost naked twister with a bunch of college girls, that apparently was combo'd with spin the bottle. He's so fucking smug about it too because the rest of us didn't see him most of the night," Tommy said. "Lucky bastard. Him and every other asshole who got laid last night."

"Weren't you bragging at breakfast?" Johnny asked, they were walking towards the front door.

Daniel thought about taking his car and leaving, he should, he should get in the Ford and drive home, but he remembered his mother telling him to buy Johnny lunch or to pay for gas, so he hurried after the two. Tommy stepped aside to let him walk between them and threw an arm around Daniel's shoulders.

"Man, Johnny just doesn't get it does he? Yes, found a hot babe, had some fun, but she didn't so much as want my number. I feel used man. It doesn't compare to Bobby. Johnny wasn't here when the girls left. They all crowded him at the door. They all gave him a fucking kiss before they left. The last one wrote her name on his hand in sharpie and said to look them up if he's thinking of going to UCLA. And you know what Dutch said? *Bet you don't even remember any of their names.* And then Bobby went to the door and waved his arm all big and said goodbye to each of the girls by name. The look on Dutch's face was fucking priceless. Bobby's been an insufferable asshole the rest of the morning," Tommy said pushing the door open.

Bobby was fixing flowers in one of the vases at the entrance and looked up when they came in. His lips were a bright color from lipstick and his hair was messy.

"Hey welcome back."

"Johnny says you must be channeling, oh who the hell was that again Johnny?" Tommy asked.

"Dionysus," Johnny said. "Greek god of wine and a bunch of other stuff like ecstasy."

"The party god," Bobby said with a grin. "I think that fit for last night." He nodded his approval and then frowned. "Well for everyone but you Johnny."

"What do you mean?" Johnny asked with a deep frown.

Bobby's smile was smug, Tommy was right Daniel realized, only Tommy had disappeared, his arm had left Daniel's shoulder. Bobby turned to Daniel and gave an exaggerated sigh, like a disappointed parent.

"Feels like everyone at least got at least a kiss last night *except* Johnny."

Before Daniel could process what he said Bobby was running, laughter echoing the halls, Johnny's hand was in a fist.

"You didn't-?" Daniel didn't know what he wanted to say, they hadn't talked about it. He didn't know whether he was relieved Johnny hadn't said anything or worried. "Wait, he said *except* you, who do they think *I* kissed?"

Johnny glanced down at him, his cheeks pink. "They think you and Ali got uh...far."

"Why? We didn't?" Daniel said confused, stalking off in the direction Bobby had run in.

There was no reason for them to believe he and Ali had done anything. He was done with her. It was over. It'd be harder to get through everything if there was a rumor going around that they'd had sex at the party.

"They just assumed," Johnny said, walking next to him, taking off his sunglasses and hooking them in his shirt. It tugged the fabric down a bit revealing his collarbone and Daniel had to drag his eyes away, he was on a mission, he couldn't be distracted.

He found the ex-cobra's in the kitchen. Large trash bags were sitting around. Jimmy was sitting at the island, head on the marble looking like he had the world's worst hangover. Dutch was making coffee and Bobby and Tommy were wrapping leftover pizza in foil. They looked up at the sound of footsteps.

"Want to take some pizza home with you LaRusso?" Tommy asked. "We've still got too much."

Daniel breathed. He felt his skin flush red, there was no way to get through this without embarrassing himself.

"Hey man, have fun last night?" Jimmy asked pulling away from the counter.

"Of course he did," Dutch said with a laugh. "Ali was here."

"I didn't do anything with Ali," Daniel blurted out. He dropped his gaze. "So don't go spreading that shit like a rumor. I didn't even get to talk to her. Okay? She-we're," he couldn't do it. He'd buy Johnny lunch some other day. He was so angry thinking about Ali. Yeah, he also kissed someone else. But it didn't feel the same. He hadn't done it in the open as if he didn't care who saw him. Everything about it felt like a slap in the face.

"But Ali was here, her car-" Tommy said, Daniel could hear the confusion in his voice. "The girls said she was here."

The floor was so clean, it shined, and Daniel could see himself in it, his hands in useless fists at his sides. "Yeah, well she wasn't here with me."

Silence filled the kitchen.

"Thanks for the invite," Daniel said. "But just don't go assuming, don't go talking like that, because it didn't happen. I don't think she even knew I was here. I don't think she would've cared."

His eyes were burning, he did not want to cry in front of the ex-cobras, not in this kitchen. They weren't his friends. They were Johnny's friends. They felt bad and they were dealing with their guilt. They knew Ali longer than they knew Daniel. There was no reason for them to pick him if it came to it.

He ran a hand through his hair and laughed, it was all so ridiculous, so stupid, all this over a girl, and no wonder Helen of Troy started a war. He'd never understood the story, but now he got it. His pride was severely damaged and it pissed him off.

He glanced up at Johnny. "Ma wants me to buy you lunch or something sometime, or to pay for gas. Just let me know okay. Miyagi's got stuff to do if you get bored. But I got to go."

He turned and walked fast away from the ex-cobras, out of their fancy nest, past the remnants of revelry, and out to the car. He kept waiting,

tense to hear laughter echo the halls after him, to hear their voices follow him out, taunting, but there was nothing.

He settled into the Ford, hands shaking as he put the keys in the ignition and he drove off.

He breathed, tried to calm himself down, driving with nowhere in mind.

He had enough gas.

He found a road that went along the ocean and drove along with it for a while before parking and he got out.

The section of the beach was empty. He sat down by the beach, crossing his legs, and closed his eyes. He breathed in with the tide and out as it left, focusing on the waves breathing with the ebb and flow of the water until his heart no longer was pounding in his ears.

Until his veins no longer felt like they were on fire, until his shoulders relaxed, until his mind was blank, and he was nothing but his breath and the waves and the feeling of the sand beneath him.

Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The door shut and the sound was louder than any other sound in the mansion. Johnny half turned, debating whether he should go after Daniel, but that look was begging to be left alone. He sighed and turned back.

"What the fuck happened last night?" Dutch asked. "I saw LaRusso run out of the room, thought that little punk was going to get some."

Johnny sighed opening the fridge and pulling out a pineapple soda twisting off the cap.

"Daniel stumbled upon Ali with someone else," he said quietly.

"Seriously?" Bobby asked, all his smugness seeming to collapse, eyes filled with shock sitting down as well.

"Don't go blabbing about it, let them figure out their own shit. Who knows what will happen," Johnny said with a shrug. "It's not our business," he said pointedly.

"Not our business!" Jimmy repeated, loudly and then winced. "We spent two years listening to you talk about Ali like she was the hottest thing in the Valley and then she dumped you. We watched you fall apart. Watched you wrestle with her moving on, not wanting to talk to you, ignoring you, and then what, now Daniel's not good enough for her either? It's fucked up man."

"However," Dutch said raising his finger.

"However?" Tommy asked.

"If they break up Johnny can help LaRusso back onto his feet."

"I don't want to be a rebound," Johnny said with a pointed glare.

"You think Daniel would do that?" Bobby asked gently.

"I don't know, but clearly Ali must've. I never thought she'd do something like that," Johnny said with a frown. He sighed. "But I

didn't see what happened, I didn't talk to Ali. So it's all secondhand, and it's again, *none* of our business, so you all keep your mouths shut."

"Then take these out will you?" Bobby asked kicking one of the trash bags.

Johnny sighed, setting his soda down. He didn't trust them, but he had dipped while they were working so he'd do it. He paused though to listen from outside the room.

"Spill Bobby," Jimmy sounded tired.

"If Daniel and Ali call it quits, like soon, then we need to make sure Daniel comes to the lodge next weekend."

"Easy," Dutch said.

Johnny shook his head, without karate they all had too much time on their hands to scheme. He didn't care.

He carried the bags out to the trash can and threw them in. It smelled foul. He backed away with disgust. He didn't want to know what they'd found, just hoped it wasn't something dead because it smelled rotten. He walked back to gather the rest that he knew were sitting at the doors around the house.

Going to the lodge would take Daniel's mind off of everything, and he could have fun in the snow. He'd been looking forward to it so much. With luck, it'd help. Plus Ali wasn't invited to that. She was banned from anything not open to the whole grade because the guys had decided he didn't need to be tortured like that. Plus she had her own friends to hang out with. So they could easily take Daniel out into the mountains and have a good time. He wanted to see Daniel's face when he saw the snow.

This brought some ease to Johnny, thinking warmly about the future, of how things could be better, how he could help.

He cleared out trash from most of the rooms then went up to the bedrooms. All the doors were unlocked now and Johnny collected towels and bedding and shoved them into the laundry chute in the middle of the hall, dragging them out of the rooms.

He wondered what Mr. Miyagi needed help with.

The guys had gotten a lot of work done already. Most of the clean-up.

All the trash was taken care of, vacuuming, mopping. From a glance out the window, they'd cleaned up outside too. He could finish up soon and make his way back to Seven Seas to help out Mr. Miyagi.

It was a little exhausting clearing out the rooms but he finished quickly and went to his room, cleaning up and gathering his things, and hooking the bonsai under his arm.

He made his way back down to the kitchen and picked up his pineapple soda that was sweating on the counter.

"I'm going to head out. Bedrooms are done, trash is taken out," Johnny said.

"Where are you going?" Bobby asked, curious.

"Daniel said Mr. Miyagi had stuff for me to do, so I'm going to go see what he needs help with."

Jimmy picked up some foil-wrapped pizza and shoved it in Johnny's bag. "Take some lunch man."

"Thanks. Later," he said raising the soda in a wave and heading out.

He settled the bonsai in the passenger seat and his pineapple soda in the cupholder. He wondered if it was ridiculous to keep going back to Reseda, back to seeing Daniel or Mr. Miyagi. But it was better than going home. It was a welcome distraction.

As he drove, as he listened to his music, he thought about Ali. Thought about her parents.

He'd always wondered if they'd known he'd been homeless before Sid if they would've praised him so much. If they would've told Ali he was a nice boy she should date, if they would've let him dance with her after they'd broken up at the country club.

Without Sid, without the fancy car, when it came to class Johnny was lower than Daniel on the ladder.

He wondered if having access to it, a taste of it had made him a worse person. He thought it probably did, like that quote he'd heard in history class.

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

It'd been something their history teacher had written on the board in

class, some British politician had said it he thought. Made them write an essay about it. Johnny had struggled with it. He hadn't felt like he had any power. He'd written out of his ass. A bunch of bullshit that sounded nice, like how he talked at country clubs, he knew how to sound smart without putting his mind to it.

But now, now he'd have a different essay to turn in. He was pretty sure the power of living in the hills, in Encino in a big mansion gave him status even if he still felt like the kid he'd been. The power of being a karate champion made him feel strong. It all made him feel bigger than he was and no one had tried to tell him he wasn't as much of a badass as he'd felt.

It wasn't until he'd lost, until he woke up and realized how corrupted everything had gotten that he deserved every hit Daniel landed. It was a wake-up call.

He pulled to a stop at a stop light and picked up his soda and took a sip and pulled the pizza out of his bag and unwrapped the foil, eating it before continuing on.

Things could be better, things could be worse.

He wanted to see Ali. Not to yell at her, she was in the same trap he had been.

Not to explain himself.

But he owed her an apology.

He shouldn't have kissed her at the country club. He'd thought it was funny. But had regretted it even before she hit him.

He broke his code. He'd taken advantage of the moment.

He burned with shame now when he thought of it. When he thought of how he'd joined in on the laughter when Daniel fell covered in food.

He pulled into his usual spot at the Seven Seas apartment complex, there wasn't a Ford anywhere but he recognized Mr. Miyagi's truck and made his way to the workshop. The wooden chimes clattered.

"Mr. Miyagi?" Johnny called softly. "Daniel said you had some things for me to do?"

"Ah Johnny-san, welcome," Mr. Miyagi said with a smile. "Come, much to do."

Johnny took the offered toolbox and followed Mr. Miyagi around the apartment complex. He wore gloves and cleaned out drains which was disgusting and he felt like probably some karma for not helping the guys through the grosser section of clean up. He cleaned the gutters, unstuck windows, and fixed leaky faucets. When they reached the end of the list Mr. Miyagi patted Johnny on the shoulder.

"Tomorrow come to house."

"Okay," Johnny said with a smile.

He didn't want to go home, but he did.

Sid's car wasn't in the garage and the tension released from Johnny's shoulders.

He found his mother in the kitchen alone. His dinner was waiting under a little dome to keep it warm and he sat next to her.

It'd been a while since they had a quiet Saturday night in the tiny kitchen.

The one Sid hated.

"Sid's on set, will be till Wednesday, they're on location," Laura said with a smile, pouring herself some wine. "How was the party?"

"It was good, I think," Johnny said lifting the lid to salmon and greens.

"You think?" she asked eyebrow quirked. "Were you designated sober person again?"

"Yeah," Johnny said. "Which was for the best. I had to drive Daniel home."

"Daniel came? Daniel LaRusso? Wait back up. Did he accept your apology?"

Johnny frowned thinking about it. "He said he needed time, but I've been helping Mr. Miyagi out so we see a lot of each other outside of school. I also took him to the doctor and got his knee looked at."

"How bad is it?" Laura asked, voice a hushed whisper.

"He's okay, just has to be careful. He's on the sidelines for gym the rest of the year at least. They gave him crutches, but he's stubborn."

Laura laughed. "Sounds like someone else I know."

Johnny rolled his eyes, taking a bite of his fish.

"You paid?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"How much?" she whispered.

"A lot," Johnny said softly.

"Your-" she trailed off eyebrows knit in worry, the rest left unsaid.

Johnny shrugged. "I'm fine. I'm just relieved he's okay."

"Oh honey," she whispered reaching out and patting his hand giving it a gentle squeeze. "So he came to the party?"

"Yeah, and I think he had a good time, up until uh, he saw Ali," Johnny's voice dropped low, "Kissing a college football player."

"It never ends does it? That poor boy," Laura said with a sigh. "I stopped trusting her after she dumped you without so much as a howdy-do. How are you holding up?"

"Better than Daniel, I mean I'm over Ali. I think I owe her an apology if she'll ever listen to me long enough to hear it. But, I'm pissed she got *that* drunk."

"And Daniel?"

"Broken-hearted," Johnny said softly.

"Well of course!" Laura said draining her glass of wine. "Boy goes to a party to see his girl and finds her with someone else he's bound to be upset."

Johnny remembered when he'd been the someone else.

"Maybe it was a misunderstanding."

She shook her head. "How'd the boys do?"

"Had a good time," Johnny said.

"So just you and Daniel didn't?"

Johnny sighed digging at his fish. He was destroying it. It wasn't as good as the fish Mr. Miyagi made. But he shouldn't complain. Not in front of his mother.

There was a time when she did everything she could to make sure he had food, so he promised himself he'd always eat everything he was given in front of her.

"You need to have some fun Johnny, find someone new to like. Anyone you got your eye on?" Laura asked. "There's a party coming up at the country club you can meet the other kids your age there. There's supposed to be new members and their families."

Johnny scooped up his fish and ate it.

He felt like he should tell her.

He didn't tell his mother all the details of his relationship with Ali, but she knew the highs and lows, knew the basics.

And she knew he also liked guys.

He hadn't mentioned the lifeguard, but she knew he'd been meeting someone to go on dates, that it was a guy.

He couldn't hide it forever. Especially if he was going to keep hanging out with Daniel, she'd wonder why when she thought he'd paid off his debt.

He knew she'd considered it done with covering the medical expenses. Johnny felt like there was more he had to do, more to apologize, to make things right.

"I *do* like someone," he said softly spearing his greens.

It was like the staff always made all of his least favorite foods even though he never complained.

Her eyes were suddenly very sharp and focused on him. He felt nervous.

Unlike the lifeguard, she'd *met* Daniel. She *knew* Daniel. She knew their history, and he knew it was fucked up that he suddenly liked

him after being such as asshole.

He drank the water at the table, taking big gulps. It'd have to be like a Band-Aid.

"I like Daniel," he whispered not meeting her gaze.

She leaned back heavily, arms crossed across her chest, head tilted, thinking.

"He kicked you in the face," she said.

"I know."

"Sucker punched you on the beach."

"Yeah."

"You nearly killed him."

"..."

"You nearly broke his leg."

"I-"

"Johnny," she said. "You think this is wise?"

Her tone was as if Johnny had just told her he was trying to make toast while in the bath. Disappointed and panicked, worried and tired.
,

"I didn't choose to feel this way," Johnny said, voice a little steelier than he meant.

"But it's hopeless, he's...he's-"

"He listens. He's kind, he's sweet, he's a loudmouth who gets himself into trouble, but he's so fucking graceful when he fights when he practices karate. He has a great relationship with Mr. Miyagi and his mother. He works hard, he's funny, he's in the progress of forgiving me, and yeah maybe we're not going to become anything more than neutral parties, but maybe we'll be allies. He's only been training seriously for six months and kicked my ass *while* injured. He kept getting up no matter how much we knocked him down. He just bounces back up. He's resilient and he's smart and listening to him talk calms me down. I like just being near him, and I get it's messed up.

The fact he wouldn't stay down pissed me off, the fact he kept coming after me pissed me off. He wouldn't just leave me alone, and he just wouldn't shut up. But I see how hard he works now, that all that energy he has comes out wrong sometimes and it misses the mark and it pisses people off and he doesn't mean it. And I want to keep him safe. I want to stay by his side for as long as he's okay with it. And I get it's hopeless and one-sided and I'm so screwed. It would've been fine. I'd be okay but I know it's going to be so much worse now because I didn't do anything. I didn't. I swear I didn't. But he was drunk and upset and Ali had kissed someone else and and he kissed me and it was nice, it was perfect, it was probably a mistake and it hurts knowing that, knowing I just happened to be a warm person nearby when he was upset. And it was a drunken kiss, but...but...it's all so confusing, but I like him and I want to be near him, stay by him, help him however I can because I hate everything I did. How out of control I was. It makes me sick to think of all the stuff I did. That people cheered me on, that my friends kept me going, joined in, and that I let myself go so far. So if this is the torture I get, if this is my karma so be it. I deserve it."

Laura's eyes were filled with concern. She got up and hugged him tight, she smelled like the fancy perfume Sid bought her and he missed the way she used to smell, like shampoo and soap and coffee.

Her sleeve was wet and it took him a while to realize he was crying.

He turned his head burying it into her shoulder.

"I like him so much," Johnny whispered.

She rubbed his back and slid her fingers through his hair, soothingly.

"So what you're telling me," she said quietly, "was that despite everything you got a kiss last night from someone you like?"

He laughed.

She sighed and rested her chin on top of his head. "So what's the plan?"

He breathed, it was less shaky than he feared. "The guys are inviting him to everything we have planned for the rest of the year."

"Oooh smart," she said. "So let's see, so does that mean he's going to the lodge?"

"Yeah, if he still wants to."

She pulled away and cupped his face in her hands and gave his cheeks a pinch the way she used to when he was little.

"Good luck Johnny," she said quietly a warm smile on her lips.

"Thanks, Mom," he whispered.

"Be careful with him okay? I don't want you two fighting. It's dangerous when you fight."

He laughed. "I'm trying to not fight anymore."

"Good," she said sinking back into her seat.

She sounded so relieved.

He finished his food and she turned on the radio and he listened to her hum along to it and sing along with the songs she knew.

It reminded him of when he was little, she used to sing and dance while he ate.

She always told him she'd already eaten, but he knew now it'd been a lie.

She'd given him all they had. She ate whatever leftovers he left behind. Which wasn't always much.

She'd dance around in their kitchen, throwing her hair, full of delight distracting him from the meager meal, pulling him along to dance with her, to sing with her.

No matter how much Johnny hated Sid, the fact his mother had food to eat, and they weren't struggling made him keep his opinions to himself.

Whenever he forgot it was moments like this where the stark contrast was so clear and killed all the words, all the complaints before he even thought of voicing them. Drowning out all the dissent.

His mother deserved happiness after everything.

Chapter End Notes

The quote is from a 19th-century politician named John Emerich

Edward Dalberg Acton, first Baron Acton (1834–1902). The other half of the quote is "Great men are almost always bad men." And he might've been inspired by this quote from William Pitt the Elder, Earl of Chatham "Unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it"

Could write an essay about that and how that idea is played with in Karate Kid/Cobra Kai. But I'm going to work on the next chapter instead. Thanks for reading (and all the comments and kudos ❤)

So sorry buddy

Chapter Notes

Moving movie things around again. Changing things.

Haruka Spiegel made Fanart (Thank you! I love it): https://harukaspiegel.tumblr.com/post/657469841757880320/johhny-lawrence-from-the-fanfic-root-beer-floats

Daniel called Ali and invited her out. She agreed readily for Sunday brunch. She asked if she could drive the Ford and he let her.

He thought he'd make it simple. *We both clearly like different people. This isn't working. You should be free. I should be free.*

Let's just be friends.

But he just couldn't bring it up. It kept twisting around. Dark and murky. The calm Mr. Miyagi recommended kept getting destroyed. He thought he'd botch it up. And she looked so happy. Like nothing had happened. Like she hadn't kissed someone else. Like he hadn't. Like everything was the same. When it wasn't. And he'd become too hot. Too angry. He tried to focus on what she was saying. Tried listening to her talk about college and the country club. But he just felt ill. Brunch ended and he hadn't said anything.

He let her drive more, he didn't trust himself behind the wheel, his hands kept shaking.

He kept trying to bring it up. But he was hoping she'd bring it up. Shouldn't she bring it up? She was the one who was seeing someone else. She was the one who had kissed someone out in the open like that.

"Why are you dating me?" Daniel asked.

It wasn't what he wanted to say. It wasn't how he wanted to start this.

"I like you, of course silly," Ali said with a laugh, but there was a bit of confusion in her voice.

"Your friends don't like me."

"They don't know you that well."

"We've had nearly 6 months for them to get to know me. They don't talk to me. They ignore me."

"Don't worry about them."

"Your parents don't like me."

"Of course they do."

"They don't. They don't like that I'm not rich or well connected. They were barely impressed that I won the All-Valley."

"They just take a while to get used to."

"You don't invite me to any of the parties."

"I didn't know you wanted to go. I mean the cobra's throw them."

"They invited me," Daniel said softly.

Surely she knew. Had to know. Could connect the dots.

"Oh, well, we should go to one together."

Why couldn't they have gone together before now? Before it was over.

"I went to the one over the weekend. I looked for you."

"I didn't see you."

"I saw you."

Her mouth became a flat line as she drove. This felt like a bad idea all of a sudden. She was speeding. Her foot getting heavier on the gas.

"Okay," she said tersely.

"I saw you kissing the football player."

"What do you want Daniel?" her voice was tight but rising.

"Why did you kiss him?"

"We've met a couple of times. He's nice, smart, going to a great school, *and* has his life together. He listens and has interesting things to say. He's not some high school kid getting into karate fights. He doesn't have some childish rivalry and I was drunk okay?"

"I think we should break up," Daniel said.

It was too fast. Too sudden. He'd been trying to hold it back but it burst through. He'd wanted to say other things before that.

"Yeah, I think you're right. You've been half out of this relationship since the beginning. Any sign of trouble and you're gone. Like when Johnny kissed me. You didn't even try to see what happened, you ran. You are always shrugging me off, ever since we met on the beach," Ali said, hands tight on the wheel.

Daniel watched the needle of the speedometer slowly rise.

"Ali," he said softly.

"Then you win the tournament and I thought, *finally*, smooth sailing, but then you started hanging out with Johnny, forgave him for all his shit. He isn't entitled to your time, isn't entitled to mine, and yet you keep hanging out with him like he's cool. Johnny *ruined* my relationship with him and now he's ruined this one."

A ball rolled out into the road and Ali cursed spinning the wheel to try and avoid it and spinning out.

They spun towards the guard rail, there was a loud crunch.

"You okay?" Daniel asked, reaching out, hoping she hadn't hurt anything.

She shrugged him off.

"Don't touch me," she said. "You know." She turned to him eyes full of venom, "That guy's been asking me out for months. Asked me if I wanted to have dinner tonight, and I turned him down. But now... now I think I'll call him back. I think I might be in love with him, so I might as well."

"Fine! You do that," Daniel said.

She pushed the door open and got out.

"I'm going to walk the rest of the way home. Enjoy being around those entitled assholes, you and your stupid big mouth are going to end up in the hospital and you're going to find yourself all alone because you push everyone away."

She slammed the door and Daniel winced.

He fucked up. He unbuckled his seatbelt and climbed over into the driver's seat. He watched her make her way to the sidewalk, walking absolutely pissed off. He'd been coming so close to saying that he'd kissed Johnny. He wanted to throw it in her face. He'd been drunk too. But he didn't kiss Johnny just because he'd been there. He kissed Johnny because he liked him and wanted to and the alcohol just made it seem like a good idea. And if that had happened to Ali then she must really like the guy. Because he really liked Johnny. And it was for the best.

He leaned his head against the back of the headrest and groaned. He'd practiced their conversation a bunch of times, trying to get it to be a balanced breakup.

A *hey, you seem to like this other guy and you don't seem to like me, and I...I seem to like this other guy too and honestly panicked at the thought of having sex with you, no offense, but like we probably should break up, right?*

But it had spiraled out of control. The balance had caught on fire and turned into absolute chaos.

He was hurt, but mostly because she kept telling him she liked him but he realized she probably didn't.

Maybe as a friend.

They kept trying to mash themselves into a relationship and it hurt. And it hurt that she just couldn't be honest with him.

Months, he thought. The college guy had been making moves for months.

He sighed and gently put his hands on the wheel

. What would he say to Mr. Miyagi? He gave him the car for his birthday.

He felt tears well in his eyes. It'd been the best birthday gift he'd ever been given.

"I'm so sorry Mr. Miyagi," he whispered, coaxing the car away from the side of the road and making his way to Mr. Miyagi's house. The car creaked and groaned the entire way. It rattled and sounded like it was on death's door and he pleaded with it the entire way.

"I'm so sorry buddy, I should never have let Ali drive you. I shouldn't have tried to have that conversation while she was driving. I was just so damn nervous. Oh fuck, hang in there buddy. I'm going to get you home. Is that smoke? Oh god, what are you supposed to do when your car starts smoking? Are you supposed to get out? Keep going buddy. We're going to get there. Even if I have to jump out and push you the way we do with Ma's car. Come on, see buddy, almost home, almost to Mr. Miyagi's. Oh, I'm such an idiot. I saw how she was all along, she's got a temper, like me. I should've thought *Daniel, what the hell would you do if you were driving her car and she broke up with you while you were driving?*

"Ugh, it's not her fault, not really. They always tell you if you see a ball in the road because there's usually some dumb kid half a second behind it who's going to come running out, it could've been so much worse. We could've been hurt, but she didn't look hurt now did she buddy? No, she didn't. She looked fighting mad, but fine. And me, not a scratch on me. Thank god. Ma's going to kill me. *Hey Ma, broke up with Ali and totaled my car, how's your day been? Ha.* Oh what am I going to say to Mr. Miyagi. He's going to kill me. No. Mr. Miyagi won't kill me. He'll just be so disappointed. This was his big gift for me on my birthday. When I went after Ali because he told me all that balance stuff. I should've let her go.

"But buddy she was the prettiest girl I ever saw. And Freddy said she probably liked me, she kept looking at me and I thought, well maybe. Maybe this time I'll fall in love with the girl. Ha. Ha! Leaves me for a football player. Ha! Who wouldn't?

"Oh I'm so sorry, you were my favorite car, best birthday gift I've ever gotten. I had all these dreams for us you know? I mean I really thought Ali and I would last till prom at least. Figured we'd pick her up and take her and I'd wear this powder blue tux with ruffles that was my dad's that Ma's saved for me and it just needs some alterations. I mean I guess I could still wear it but, I guess we won't be picking up Ali. Maybe that's for the best, she's out in the hills anyway. It's so far away.

"I was also thinking a road trip somewhere after I graduated. You, me, and the desert. Or we could go up into the mountains. There are all these state parks around. Johnny took Ma and I to that cool carhop, there's got to be all sorts of other cool stuff if I just looked around. Thought we'd take Mr. Miyagi fishing a couple of times, thought I'd take Ma somewhere nice. If I went to college I thought I'd take you. You know? Pack up the car with all sorts of stuff and head out to that

new chapter.

"Oh why don't they fix the damn roads? That bump could've popped a tire! Come on, look! Look! There's Mr. Miyagi's house, oh god that sound. I swear I've never heard a car make this sound before. It's like a death rattle. Come on, let me get you in park. Oh buddy you did it, rest now. I'm so sorry."

Daniel parked the car and got out, the car was smoking. Mr. Miyagi was coming out to see what the rattle was.

"Daniel-san, what happened?"

"You mean what didn't happen? I let Ali drive and she redesigns the fender, drove us into a guard rail. I don't know how she totaled it but the engine isn't running right either," Daniel said hoping out and past him, shutting the door while Mr. Miyagi looked at the car.

He walked into the house, grabbed a drink from the fridge, and came back.

"And I tried it Mr. Miyagi, worked out our whole conversation to be as peaceful as possible and it crashed worse than the car. She's going on a date with that UCLA football player she met tonight. So that's over. Says she thinks she might be in love with him."

Daniel opened the can and scoffed.

"In love! Seriously? We went from a drunken party mistake to being in love with the guy in less than twenty minutes. I don't know what's the truth. She should've just picked whatever and stuck to it. Saved the confusion. I had this whole speech planned and it went out the window. I think our friendship jumped out the window when we spun too. I don't think we're going to recover. Which apparently is like a social death sentence if Johnny's friends are right. High school is over for me and there are months left Mr. Miyagi, months! I thought it was bad before, but I just can't win can I? I tried not to put my foot in my mouth and before I knew it she was pissed. The car was in ruins and she was storming off. I just wanted to understand her better is all. I didn't understand what happened, what we should do.

"I have the worst luck with girls. Worst luck. And this one, I don't know if it was worth the trouble, you know? What do I get for sticking my neck out because I thought she was pretty? Well some guy told me she was looking at me and told me to go up to her and talk to her? And then what happens? A gang of karate dudes crash down around

me, after my neck for half the school year and my knee all banged up. Do I get to go to prom with her? Nope. I win the tournament and she bails in less than a month after. Ridiculous. Just my luck."

He shook his head and sighed walking over to him.

"The car's totaled isn't it Mr. Miyagi. I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have let her drive."

Mr. Miyagi was leaning over the hood fiddling with the engine and Daniel sipped on his drink with a deep frown. Mr. Miyagi moved something and the sputtering came to an end and the engine roared to life like normal. He grinned at Daniel.

"How'd you do that?" Daniel asked with a gasp.

"I tell you later. I get Johnny-san, we fix up your fender and the rest, you feel better," Mr. Miyagi said with a chuckle walking off towards the house.

"Wait, Johnny is here?" Daniel asked following after him.

"Yes, have many jobs for Johnny-san. He learn many things. Become regular handyman. Good useful skills for life, yes?"

"And training?" Daniel asked softly.

"With time, yes. Today sanding floors."

Daniel nodded, they made their way to the back of the house. Johnny was on his hands and knees working on the wooden platforms. Mr. Miyagi had added more and Daniel wondered when he'd done so. But he was having Johnny do all of them. The movement was familiar, he was doing it the way Mr. Miyagi had taught Daniel, but it was different watching Johnny do it, utterly focused on what he was doing, breathing.

He had a flannel wrapped around his waist, he was wearing shorts today and a tight shirt with the sleeves rolled up, showing off arm muscles, or to stay cool. Daniel lifted his drink to his forehead for a sense of coolness because he felt too hot. The muscles at work, flexed and more prominent were distracting.

He almost didn't hear Mr. Miyagi talking and he had to scramble to get his face under order as Johnny leaned back on his heels, the way Daniel had seen in the Cobra Kai dojo.

"-accident," Mr. Miyagi was saying.

Johnny hopped up in the way Daniel had seen at the dojo and hadn't seen much since. He spun to face Daniel.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Daniel said waving his hand.

"Did you hit your head?" Johnny asked.

His blue eyes were too intense, too full of worry. Daniel couldn't hold his gaze without giving something away.

"Yeah, no I'm fine. The car hit the guard rail, but I'm fine. Drove straight here. Didn't hit anything in the car. The car makes it look worse than it was, really," Daniel said.

Johnny's eyes rose to the drink Daniel was pressing against his head.

"Yeah, this, uh, it's hot out," Daniel said awkwardly dropping the drink and his hand down from his forehead and to his side.

Mr. Miyagi called for Johnny to follow him and he hesitated just a moment, looking Daniel over as if trying to look for injuries Daniel was hiding. But then he was hurrying after where Mr. Miyagi was waiting. Daniel wandered back into the kitchen and watched from the window. They went to work on putting the headlight that had started to fall out back in and then on the bumper that had been hanging off. Other than a few scratches Daniel had to admit that it could've been worse.

It looked good, better, and he felt relieved.

He found the green tea, filled some glasses, and hurried out to thank them.

"See," Mr. Miyagi said. "Car looked worse than was."

"Thank you."

"What happened?" Johnny asked taking the green tea, flicking one of the towels they'd been using on the car over his shoulder.

"A ball rolled out into the street, slammed the breaks, spun out, and hit the guard rail," Daniel said.

He couldn't bring himself to tell Johnny that Ali had been driving, couldn't bring up to him that he and Ali had broken up. What would happen if he did?

Would Johnny change his mind and try to go after her again? Ali was with the UCLA guy, but maybe she'd pick Johnny again and Daniel didn't think he could handle that.

He needed more time to come up with a plan.

"Glad you're okay," Johnny said then turned to Mr. Miyagi. "I'm going to go back to the sanding, okay?"

"Hai," Mr. Miyagi nodded, taking the tea Daniel handed him. When Johnny left Mr. Miyagi turned to Daniel and looked up at him quizzically. "Why not tell Johnny-san?"

Daniel sighed.

"He and Ali used to date. It feels like we finally are getting somewhere good and if... if I tell him...he doesn't need it on his plate. It makes the whole last 6 months absolutely worthless."

Mr. Miyagi shook his head. "Daniel-san grow much over six months, learn much, become different than when first move here."

"You think?"

Mr. Miyagi nodded. "Just like Johnny-san, change is possible and good things can come from it."

Daniel nodded. "Well do you have anything for me to do Mr. Miyagi?"

Mr. Miyagi smiled. "You should go see mother. After big event it's important."

Daniel looked out at the house, part of him wanted to stay, wanted to look at Johnny again. But Mr. Miyagi was right.

"Yeah, yeah she's making chicken cacciatore, tonight."

"Go, go," Mr. Miyagi said shooing at him and Daniel hopped in his car and started the engine. It sounded a million times better.

He grinned at Mr. Miyagi. "You fixed it perfectly!"

Daniel had the drive to the apartment to think of what he was going to tell his mother, his hands were all clammy. His mother liked Ali.

"It just didn't work out Ma, we're two different people. We wanted different things, so we figured rather than be miserable the rest of the year we'd go our separate ways. No, uh, we're not going to still be friends, Ma. I think uh, well she wrecked my car and nearly killed us. Okay that wasn't fully her fault. Uh, she kissed someone else and I also kissed someone else. Yeah Ma, you actually do know them. You like them. Maybe that's too obvious. She never met any girls from school. Okay, let's try again. Hey Ma, how was your day? Have a nice day? Yeah, brunch was okay. It was good. The food was great. Ali and I broke up though. I think it was mutual you know? We just kept drifting apart and wanted different things you know? It's okay Ma, I'm okay. I was hurt at first, but I mean we got into a car accident, and that kind of put things in perspective. Oh, everyone's fine Ma. And Mr. Miyagi already fixed the car. No big deal. Minor accident really. We realized how unhappy we really were with each other and so, well that's over. I think it's still a little soon to see if we'll be friends in the long run, but that's okay."

He sighed parking the Ford and made his way up to the apartment.

"Hey, Ma! I'm home!" he called.

"Hey! How was brunch?" Mrs. LaRusso asked from where she sat on the couch watching TV.

She muted it and turned to look at him.

"It was good. The place was great, we should go some time."

"Yeah? How's Ali?"

Daniel took a deep breath and walked over, sitting down next to her.

"We broke up."

"Oh, honey."

"I'm okay though," he said quickly. "Also we got into a minor car accident, both of us are okay. Mr. Miyagi already fixed it."

She reached out and pulled him into her chest.

"Oh what a rough day," she said smoothing his hair. "You know it's

okay, there's going to be so many other great people in your life you know?"

Daniel pulled away and looked at his mother suspiciously. "You're taking this rather well."

She laughed. "Oh honey I dated so many guys before I met your father. It takes a while, and you're young."

"But you liked Ali and...wait, you *did* like Ali right?"

"Yes! She was a sweet girl," Mrs. LaRusso said.

"But?"

She sighed. "When Johnny dropped you off he asked me not to mention Ali, said he wouldn't tell me what happened but it hadn't been good. And it got me thinking. You know how we picked her up from that big mansion and she was all game to drive while we pushed? I thought it was sweet, but honey you were absolutely mortified. You were so uncomfortable. And then Johnny and his friends were talking to you when I came to pick you up and you also were suddenly so upset. You were snarky and upset with her. You were uncomfortable like the entire time you two were dating."

"Ma!"

She shrugged. "You gotta make these discoveries yourself. I figured she wasn't going to become my daughter-in-law, sweet girl, but you just weren't all in, you know?"

Daniel threw his head back with a groan, it was exactly what Ali said. "Seriously?"

She patted him on the shoulder.

"Daniel you are a people person honey, you'll bounce back. You'll charm someone else and you'll be comfortable with them and comfortable with all of this you know?" she said motioning around her.

He looked at her.

"We don't have a big place and maybe this isn't the coolest neighborhood, but it's nice honey and it's working and you've got food and clothes and you have a very nice car and Mr. Miyagi. I think

we've got it good kiddo," she said gently patting his face. "And you'll find someone who doesn't care whether you're rich or poor and will like you for you and you'll feel comfortable letting them in, you did not let her in honey. You kept her at arm's length. Now, want to watch *Murder She Wrote* with me?"

"No Ma, it's okay. I actually got some homework I should probably get to," Daniel said standing and heading to his room.

He shut the door and flopped face down onto his bed.

He tried to think about what she'd said. He wanted so desperately to be cool, for Ali to think he was cool, to follow her into a life that wasn't real. He wanted her to think he fit in easily around her fancy friends and family when he didn't and then he got bitter about it when reality set in.

He got embarrassed about his mother, the apartment complex he lived in, where he lived, that he had a crummy bike to get around with and couldn't pick her up on a date, and he didn't like that they had to give the car a running start. It was embarrassing.

Everything about Ali's life seemed perfect, picture-perfect. He felt awkward and awful by her side, clumsy and like nothing he did turned out right.

He'd never invited her over. They always went somewhere else, he tried to limit her exposure to his life, pretending to be cooler than he was. No wonder he crashed and burned.

He'd already not wanted to be in California, he hadn't wanted to leave Newark. He'd whined the whole way, complained the whole trip, despite how much his mother tried to warm him up to it, tried to cheer him up. He was just constantly miserable and he took everything as a result of his mother moving him there, as someone else's fault.

He blamed everyone but himself.

But maybe his mother was right. Maybe he wasn't letting anyone in. So they didn't get to know each other well. Just a surface glance.

He knew more about Johnny than he did about Ali. He'd *tried* to find out more. He *wanted* to know more.

With Ali it was all just fun dates and the bond of people with a

common enemy. Those weren't good bases for a relationship. Not if he hadn't tried to add more, not if he kept jumping up and down on what they'd built until it started to crack.

Their relationship, the roots were already fragile, and rather than treat it or make it better he ignored it. He didn't tend to it and it rotted.

He just kept his feelings, a lot of resentment, to himself, blamed her for everything.

How could he be better?

Johnny had already been over more than Ali had and that desire to hide away how he lived wasn't there.

Maybe because of their history, maybe because Daniel had seen the inside of Johnny's home, heard the staff, heard his stepfather, and knew that as nice as the outside was it wasn't as nice on the inside. It was a fancy cage and it was poisoning Johnny.

He saw things differently with Johnny. He wasn't embarrassed to show his home. The apartment felt more sturdy, homier, and Daniel wanted Johnny to get a chance to enjoy that. Wanted Johnny to try his mothers cooking. He liked the way his mother and Johnny interacted, minus the occasional hiccup. But she was impressed by him and he seemed to like her.

He'd even seen the inside of Daniel's room, Ali never got that far.

He'd also never been in her house, never ate at her table either. He never saw her room.

Daniel had been into Johnny's room twice now. He knew how to get in without dealing with the staff now. And his friends sat with them. Descended upon Daniel like he was a welcome addition, like water under the bridge, even though Daniel was still nervous.

He chewed on his thumbnail.

His mother made it sound like he was actively sabotaging his relationship with Ali, and Ali made it sound like he hadn't really been in the relationship.

He needed to move slow, make sure the foundation was sturdy before attempting anything else because when he rushed he clearly crashed and burned and built a wall amongst the flames.

He couldn't do that with Johnny.

He ran his hands through his hair frustrated. He didn't even know if Johnny liked him that way, if you could. Okay, too far ahead. Friendship first. Make the sturdiest floor of friendship first and then see if he's willing to keep building if he wanted more. Focus, one step at a time. Like a dance. If Daniel was lucky they'd make their way from karate, a dance opposed, to waltzing, and if Daniel was even luckier, maybe a tango.

First up he was still invited to things, he had been invited to the lodge.

He jumped off his bed and to the door.

"Ma!" he called.

"Yeah?"

"Next weekend, Johnny and his friends invited me to a ski resort, to stay at their lodge. I still want to go. Where's our winter stuff?"

"You're going to pack now? I thought you were going to do homework?" she called back, laughing.

"I want to see if I need anything."

"Closet, the box at the top."

He walked to the closet and pulled out a few boxes marked winter and carried them to his room.

He popped open one and the smell of their home in Newark hit him like a ton of bricks. He'd forgotten how it smelled, but here it was.

He pulled out a winter jacket, snow pants, boots, a hat, gloves, and scarf.

The other box was full of sweaters, sweatpants, and other warm winter clothes. He tried them on in the mirror, trying to decide what to wear, setting things out and aside. It took a while and before he knew it he smelled dinner cooking and cursed. He grabbed his homework out of his bag, hurrying to try and get some of it done so he wouldn't have to lie to his mother.

He didn't want to have to explain to her that no he didn't do his homework, he spent all afternoon trying to decide which sweater

looked the nicest on him and still didn't know.

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

Chapter Notes

> Conversions of Fahrenheit to Celcius and US measurements to metric are in the end of the chapter notes.
>
> Along with more info about other things mentioned in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The week went by incredibly slow. The buzz of the weekend trip on the horizon made every class of lessons torture. It always hit around lunch when the ex-cobras took over their new table full of complaints about this teacher or that teacher who just didn't seem to get it. They were so close to graduating, what was the point of learning anything else? Just stamp graduated on their forehead and let them out to play before the world would come knocking on their door with reality.

Johnny noticed a lot of things throughout the week. That they were trying to figure out cars and logistics in a way they normally didn't. He couldn't take the Avanti even though he wanted to. He didn't trust it on the snowy mountain roads, which meant he had to carpool.

Usually, he could just jump in with Bobby and the two would blast music the whole ride up. But it looked like they were trying to figure out who had the biggest car with 4 wheel drive and Johnny couldn't figure out what the point was because any time they crammed everyone in the same car for extended periods of time they drove each other nuts. And most of their cars held five, not six which was the number of people they had.

Currently, the debate was between one of Tommy's cars, a Ford bronco that he argued they could just take two cars, mostly excited because the car was new and he wanted to drive or Dutch's Volkswagen Vanagon, which was practically a bus.

They were leaning towards Dutch's nightmarish van because it had room for 7.

"With how small LaRusso is he's going to only take up like half a seat so we can fill the rest of the space with beer," Dutch argued and they couldn't really find fault in his opinion, though Daniel bristled a bit.

But Dutch was all smiles and teasing in a friendly way that he calmed down a bit but his mouth was still in a hard line.

The other thing Johnny noticed was that Daniel didn't talk to Ali anymore.

They avoided each other in the halls, didn't say hello, didn't wave, didn't acknowledge one another. It was like they stopped existing to one another.

He didn't know if they'd broken up if they were just in a fight, or on a break, but the cutesy hand-holding and sweet kisses they snuck were gone.

The guys noticed as well but had the decency not to say anything, just pulled in ranks closer, pulling Daniel into more conversations at lunch. When Johnny was out with a hall pass he noticed that Jimmy had swapped seats in one of his classes he shared with Daniel and now was sitting next to him and Daniel didn't look too freaked out about it.

It was one of the classes Ali was in and Jimmy had moved in such a way, putting himself between the two.

They'd done that for him. When Ali broke up with him they fell in, hanging on to him even though he kept trying to shake them off and charge after her, they did their best to distract him, swapping to be partners with him in science and home ec since Ali refused to talk to him.

Their breakup had been a little more explosive. The whole school knew about it.

The guys in his other classes his friends weren't in, were suddenly sitting with him to replace the empty seat that once would've been Ali's. He never mentioned it, never thanked them, never knew whether they did it on their own or whether his friends told them to.

The ex-cobras had other friends, but Johnny didn't.

It was just those four.

He was determined to go find Ali and apologize to her.

Halfway through the week was some stupid fancy country club dinner. Sid was adamant that even though he was still on set that Laura had to make an appearance. Wanted her to make a good impression with

the new people so that later Sid had an in.

It was the same as always. Laura would charm them and Sid would filter through the new guests to see which ones were actually worthwhile.

He knew the Mills, they were like Sid just slightly less so. They needed to be seen and to see and they wouldn't go without Ali. So when the night came Johnny dressed up nicely and led his mother to the country club. He held out his arm to her.

Laura dressed in one of the stunning dresses she loved that Sid hated because well Sid wasn't there so who cared?

And he did the rounds, shoulders back, head held high, charming.

Ali was there, wearing a poufy dress and looking miserable, but smiling when people talked to her.

They talked to the Mills, her parents lowered their voice and whispered to Johnny and his mother.

"She finally ended it with that punk from Reseda," Mr. Mills said.

"We're so relieved, Johnny, you should go talk to her," Mrs. Mills said.

There was a hopeful tone in her voice. Like Johnny had a chance with Ali still. If they just made up, if he just tried harder, if he just said the right things Ali and he could be together again and that's all the Mills wanted.

But it wasn't what Johnny wanted.

Johnny nodded and looked at his mother who was trying very hard to keep a diplomatic look on her face but he knew she was worried. It was in her eyes for a mere second. She thought it was a terrible idea. She knew Ali was as likely to fight Johnny, to punch him in the face or kick him the way Daniel had been. In her eyes, Ali had a policy of beat the shit out of Johnny on sight.

He smiled and kissed her gently on the cheek. "I'll go say hello, will you be okay Mother?"

"Of course, extend my well wishes," she said patting him on the forearm.

He unhooked their arms and made his way over to Ali who turned her

head as he approached, nose in the air, arms crossed.

"Good evening Miss Mills," Johnny said in the most polite but formal way he could. "May I sit for a moment?"

She looked at him suspiciously, then looked past him, beyond his shoulder, and let her arms fall to her lap, sitting up straight.

"Sure, *Mr. Lawrence*," she said sarcastically but with a smile that was full of venom, it was a show, for her parents.

Johnny sat down.

"I suppose you're here because Daniel and I broke up," she said eyes narrowing on him, her hands in her lap were curled into fists.

"No," Johnny said shaking his head.

"Because he told you I'm seeing a nice UCLA football player? Who I love?" Ali asked bitterly but it was wavering.

"No," Johnny said.

"Because of our parents?"

"Only as an excuse."

"Then what the hell do you want Johnny Lawrence?" she hissed.

"To tell you I'm sorry."

Her eyes widened in surprise just for a second before narrowing.

"What sort of trick is this?"

"Not a trick. I'm trying to be better, trying to learn and I've been doing a lot of thinking," Johnny said.

She was actually listening to him, he had to move fast, he didn't know how long she'd suffer his company.

"I knew I owed Daniel an apology, a thousand of them, and his sensei, and his mother. But I overlooked you because I was hurt and confused. Because I let all of this," Johnny motioned around him. "Make me forget who I am. I let other people tell me who I was and I believed them. It wasn't until...well until everything truly fell apart that I realized how badly I'd fucked up and I've been sifting through it

and Ali, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have kissed you last time we were here together. I shouldn't have tried to force you to talk to me. I thought you owed me that, owed me an explanation, and couldn't understand why. I mean I loved you," he laughed dryly.

"Sid even had me picking out rings, kept telling me to ask you to marry me when we graduated. But that would have been such a bad idea in retrospect. You need your freedom to explore the world, to know other people. I mean I was your first serious boyfriend, you're still figuring out life like I'm still trying to figure it out. Neither of us are adult enough to get married, and shouldn't let other people try to pressure us into it. I do miss being friends with you, but I've realized that if someone doesn't want to be around me they've got their reasons and I gotta respect that. So again, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for breaking your radio, and if you want me to replace it, just let me know. And that if something happens and you need some muscle you give me a call okay? No strings. I'm not doing karate anymore, but I've realized I can still intimidate people into behaving without throwing punches and I can still fight without taking cheap shots. Not that you can't handle yourself. Your right hook is impressive. And thank you, for being with me for two years and putting up with my bullshit. I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to cheer you on. I know you want to be a doctor and I know you're going to be great at it. I wish you nothing but happiness. Uh, thanks for listening to me," Johnny said.

He stood and turned to disappear in the crowd.

He couldn't believe she'd listened for so long.

He half expected to just get up and leave, he had planned to let her go if she did.

But she watched him with those eyes he'd known so well, facial expression unreadable. He figured he'd give her her space from now on. He'd been fairly good about it since she hit him.

He found his mother and quietly returned to her side, she hooked her arm through his and gave it a squeeze. She radiated worry and concern but he gave her arm a squeeze back.

He met the people around him, walking with his mother, dancing with her, eating fancy food, things like seafood lobster, and crab with champagne.

Johnny didn't drink even though his mother said it was okay, he

figured he'd drive them home, otherwise, they'd have to take a cab and if Sid knew they wasted money on a cab they'd both get yelled at.

There was no guarantee that the people here wouldn't talk to Sid about them.

It was like being on display constantly, they couldn't relax, couldn't be themselves, but at this point, it was second nature.

On the ride home his mother was sinking into the Avanti's passenger seat, slinking lower, shoulders drooping, and relaxing out of sight of the country club, kicking off her heels let out a sigh. "At least the food is nice," she said patting her stomach.

Johnny smiled and she pushed herself back up pushing hair back behind her ear. "You okay honey?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Ali?" She left the rest question hang in the air between them. *Did she hurt you this time? Did you get into another fight? What happened?*

"I apologized, thanked her, and wished her well, she listened, and then I left her alone," Johnny said, he glanced over at her at a stoplight. "I feel better."

"Good," she said smiling back at him. "Now you can focus on Daniel."

Johnny turned bright red and quickly turned his face back to the road, shoulders going up to his ears.

She laughed. "Honey, now that you're cleaning up your act you're a catch. You might as well give it a go, right?"

"I'm still working on myself," Johnny whispered, he couldn't believe they were talking about this. She made it sound so easy.

"I know I was against the idea, at first anyway, but I'm warming up to it," she said shifting in her seat. "He's a cute kid, I mean I'd like to see him more, get to know your dynamic, meet his mother. It's just him and his mother right?"

"Uh, yeah. His dad died," Johnny said softly. "But he has Mr. Miyagi."

"I want to meet him too," she said sitting up again. "I like that he's putting you to work." She laughed.

Johnny refused to meet her gaze, knowing he was probably bright red. "We'll see, I'll uh, if there's a good time...I'll bring it up."

"Great!" she said clapping him on the shoulder and he winced because he'd been so good about not flinching around his mother but he did, he flinched. Thankfully she seemed too buzzed to notice. "It'll have to be their house, Sid will not have it. Which sucks," she said bitterly, chewing on her painted nails.

"Yeah," Johnny said.

"Oh! Your trip! Are you excited? Daniel's going, right? It's all guys right?"

"Yes."

"You got all your winter stuff out?"

"I did."

"Your board?"

"It's gone," Johnny said shaking his head. He'd didn't tell his mother when Sid broke stuff, his board had gotten totaled the year before.

"I'll give you some money to rent something, for you and Daniel," she said with a smile.

"You shouldn't Mom," Johnny said.

Sid was remarkably aware of finances, kept a close eye on every cent his mother spent. A lot of their fights broke out because she bought things for Johnny. Any money she wanted Johnny to have had to go through him and he had to approve it first. He rarely did.

She grinned. "I figured a way around it this time. I liked what you did to get an appointment with that doctor for Daniel. The trading? Yeah. I found this expensive purse for sale and I traded for it, but I took out cash for how much it was, and if Sid asks I paid in cash."

"Mom!" Johnny said looking at her in surprise.

Sid didn't care if she bought stuff for herself, things to make her prettier, it was worth it to him. She could waste thousands on purses and shoes and designer clothes and make-up. As long as she showed it off. The last time Johnny needed money she'd sold one of her purses. She donated them periodically when she felt like it was too much

when she felt like she was drowning in luxury.

Sid never understood it, but he liked that it made him look good.

She laughed delightedly. "I still have several tricks up my sleeves darling. Don't you worry about me."

At school for the rest of the week, Johnny noticed another change. The girls weren't avoiding him like the plague anymore. A couple crowded up next to him at his locker and he'd been so confused that he'd been a little more dismissive than he'd meant.

His eyes found Ali across the hall and she just gave him a nod before shutting her locker and continuing on to her classes.

The guys noticed.

Tommy told him that the ban on Johnny had apparently disappeared.

Jimmy said he heard the girls arguing like it was open season.

Dutch burst out laughing. "You put your eyes on a guy and all the girls come running."

Bobby just gave him a sympathetic look. No matter how intimidating Johnny tried to look they didn't leave him alone. They wanted to walk with him to his classes. They wanted to hang out after school. He had to tell them he had work to do and they'd complain and whine. They wanted to talk to him in class and the teachers were getting frustrated.

Ali had destroyed whatever dam she'd built and he was going to drown in the sudden attention. She was going to have him murdered and he didn't know how to politely tell her to put him back on the blacklist because he wasn't going to date. He didn't want the attention. The girls were wasting their time.

It hit suddenly on Friday as he slammed his locker door shut as to why there was a sudden feeding frenzy, why it was like blood in the water. Valentine's Day was coming up. They were trying to lay the groundwork. They knew how he celebrated the holiday.

"You want us to start a rumor?" Bobby asked quietly as they hid in one of the boy's bathrooms.

"What kind of rumor?" Johnny asked, hating that he was desperate

enough to even entertain the idea. He hated rumors.

"I mean it's not really a rumor, but it'll just be missing some facts," Bobby said. "We'd just let the girls know you already have feelings for someone, so you're not actually free to date them. You know, you're already attached. We just won't tell them who."

"That's not going to start some fight is it?" Johnny asked uneasily.

Bobby wrinkled his nose at Johnny. "I clearly am spending too much time with Dutch if my first thought to that statement was that you're a fucking idiot if you're upset at the idea of girls fighting over you."

Johnny rolled his eyes. "I just want to be left alone and for them to stop getting their hopes up."

"What did you do anyway?" Bobby asked.

"Apologized," Johnny said.

Bobby whirled on Johnny, eyes wide, "You *did not* apologize to Ali. She owes *you* an apology! She was-she was-" He dropped his voice low. "a bitch to you at the end."

Johnny sighed. "Well, I was a dick right back."

"Who the hell are you?" Bobby whispered. "Even I wouldn't have apologized to her."

"I'm trying to be better, I figured you'd be proud of me, out of everyone."

Bobby folded an arm across his chest and leaned his elbow of his other hand against it and sunk his cheek into his palm shaking his head.

"I mean I am, I just, damn Johnny. Ali wasn't even on my list of people you'd apologize to. I figured you two would be bitter enemies until the end of time."

"I'm trying to let go, you know? Mr. Miyagi just lets things go, he was telling me about how vines, you know vines right? Like grapevines and what not? That they will pull themselves onto a tree and other plants, will use them to climb up to get more sun and then start choking them, killing the plant that helped them and I thought shit, am I that fucking vine?" his hand went to his neck ever so gently. "He said the vines aren't inherently bad, and if they can get help or find

something else to climb up that's more sturdy, like the way they do orchards in wine country, then they don't choke out other plants. They're sturdy and self-reliant, but they still need help. They just got to pick something that can handle it, and Bobby man I can't be that vine that chokes everything around me out. I can't be like Kreese."

His voice dropped low towards the end. He hadn't talked about it. He didn't want to talk about it. But he couldn't stop thinking about it.

Bobby's hand came to his back and rubbed gently. He shook his head. "I don't think that's what he meant man. I don't think he meant you were the vine. It's a good analogy. But I think he meant you gotta find the parts of your life where things are stopping you from breathing, right? He's always talking about breathing right?"

"Yeah," Johnny said.

"He probably meant that you have to find the stuff that's keeping you from growing, keeping you from breathing and move it so you don't suffocate, relocate it someplace safer. Which I mean, you kinda did with Ali right? You apologized and relocated her from enemy to like neutral party. The horde of girls ready to jump you and rip your clothes off though," Bobby said with a laugh. "That's a fucking vine you need help relocating, so let us get the rumor mill going. You know Tommy is so fucking good at it, the girls listen to him."

"You think so?" Johnny asked looking at Bobby and regretting it. Bobby's face was full of concern, worry. He looked away. This is why they usually didn't talk about shit. "Yeah, go ahead, start up that rumor mill but carefully yeah?"

"On it," Bobby said, slapping his back, he turned towards the door and then paused. "You gonna be okay?"

"Of course you fucking bastard, piss off," Johnny said, trying to sound tougher than he felt.

Bobby laughed. "Hey, just remember this weekend starts soon, a couple of hours are all that stand between us and the mountains and snow."

"And Dutch's creepy van," Johnny said bitterly.

"Yeah, so creepy. You're the last one we're picking up in the hills, you gotta give directions to go get Daniel," Bobby said before waving and ducking out of the bathroom.

Johnny sighed and sunk against the sinks. He washed his hands just to do something, an excuse to not have to leave with Bobby, to try and settle his features because his eyes looked haunted when he caught sight of himself in the mirror.

The girls around his locker dwindled as the day went on, enough so that he was sure Tommy had the rumor mill going at breakneck speeds.

He didn't want to know what they thought.

It just helped that they weren't hovering, that they weren't trying to touch him. All the hands-on his arms, trying to lean in close and flirt had sent his heart panicking.

He hadn't been able to breathe when a couple of girls had chased after him and slammed their hands on his shoulders trying to walk with him and talk about classes.

He didn't want to salt the earth around him, but he needed his space.

He'd gotten so used to it, that he'd forgotten how things had been before Ali. How he'd once reveled in the attention. He'd been putting on muscle from karate and it drew everyone to him like moths. He got drunk on it. It inflated his ego.

But now, now he couldn't handle it.

When school was over he checked the time and hurried to Mr. Miyagi's. The man was home and looked surprised to see Johnny jogging towards him, bonsai in hand.

"Johnny-san, thought you had trip. Going skiing?" Mr. Miyagi asked with a frown.

"I am, but I didn't think it'd be good to take the bonsai up, right? Plus with the guys I thought it might get hurt. They're planning to fill all of the van full of ...uh...stuff. Could you...can I...leave the bonsai here with you while I'm gone? I'll come to pick it up as soon as we get back...if that's okay?" Johnny asked, heart in his throat.

He didn't want to leave the bonsai but he didn't have anyone else to watch it. He held it carefully between his hands.

Mr. Miyagi studied him for a moment then nodded and held out his hands to take the bonsai.

"Okay, Miyagi will watch," Mr. Miyagi said and relief flooded over Johnny.

"Thank you Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said bowing to him.

"Now, Johnny-san, go have fun," Mr. Miyagi said waving Johnny off and towards his car.

Johnny nodded rushing back to the Avanti.

"Thank you Mr. Miyagi!" he called again.

Mr. Miyagi just shook his head, chuckling softly to himself, carrying the bonsai back to his home and Johnny hurried home.

He parked the Avanti somewhere safe and hurried to his room, he'd mostly packed already, but he knew Dutch.

Dutch was impatient.

The other guys probably were already fully packed and hadn't gone to Reseda after school.

Heck, he was pretty sure he'd seen Tommy and Jimmy throw their shit in the back of Dutch's van that morning, planning to leave their cars safely in the school parking lot over the weekend.

Which just left picking up Bobby.

He threw a couple of books in his bag, his favorite cassettes, and his Walkman.

He had all his winter stuff ready and he turned to find his mother leaning against the door.

He'd nearly jumped out of his skin, she'd been so quiet. She walked in, shut the door, and pulled a wad of cash out of her bra that she slid into the bottom of his bag.

She kissed him on the cheek. "Have fun, be careful okay?"

"Thanks, Mom," he said softly, hugging her back. Jolting when he heard a horn blast from the front.

He zipped his bag and ran, pausing to run back and kiss her on the cheek.

"Love you," he said and she smiled and he ran down the halls ignoring the staff who wished him goodbye with a string of curses because he was leaving through the front door.

Dutch was hanging out of the van, out of the driver's seat with a smirk on his face.

"Run lover boy, run, we got places to be! That snow ain't gonna wait forever."

"Isn't it partially fake!" Johnny called, putting his stuff in the trunk and then hopping into the back when the door slid open.

The two seats in the middle of the van were taken up by Tommy and Bobby. Jimmy was in the other front seat, leaving Johnny in the back in the long seat with Daniel.

Oh, *it all made sense now*, he thought as he moved to the back.

Why they made them all ride together.

Why they'd been so adamant about picking Johnny up last even though he was closest to Dutch.

Why Jimmy and Tommy had brought their shit to school.

He wondered with a frown what other things they had planned.

Music played on the radio and the van reeked of stale weed. There were air fresheners hanging from the rearview mirror and Johnny belted himself in.

"Alright," Dutch said turning the van around and pointing it towards Reseda. "So how do we get to LaRusso? He's in Reseda right? Give me directions Johnny and speak up," he called, as Jimmy leaned over to turn down the music. He had a map unfurled in his hands.

Johnny sighed and leaned forward, ducking his head so he could watch the road, giving directions towards the South Seas apartment complex.

It took about twenty minutes but was thankfully along the way so the excuse for why they were getting Daniel last held, though Johnny was pretty sure they'd have done it that way anyway. Even if they were heading south or something rather to Mountain High.

He waited to hear Dutch lean on the horn when they arrived at South

Seas, but Dutch just let the van idle.

Bobby opened the sliding door.

"Well," Dutch said looking back at Johnny. "Go get him."

Johnny flushed and let out a string of curses as he unhooked his seatbelt and pushed himself up and ducked his head as he slipped out past Bobby.

"Hey man, you don't honk when you pick up a girl. So we're not going to honk when you pick up LaRusso," Dutch said looking too smug from the driver's seat.

Johnny flicked the side of his head as he passed.

"Fuck you man," Dutch said but there was no menace in it. "We're trying to remind you to be a fucking gentleman."

"Hey," Jimmy said rolling his window down and passing him a piece of paper. "The lodge's address and number for his mother."

Johnny took it with a nod and pushed through the gate. He nodded to the elderly woman sitting out, glad he'd brought treats in case and fed the dog one before jogging past and up the stairs to room twenty.

He knew if he waited too long the guys would kill him. They wanted to get in before dark and it was a two-hour drive. The goal was to not take breaks, to not stop until they got there.

He felt like a bundle of nerves.

He and Daniel would be stuck together in the back seat for two hours, with the guys. Who knew what they had planned.

A weekend, of the six of them, and his friends *knew*.

They *knew* he liked Daniel.

Without karate, they had all the time in the world to scheme and plan.

He raised his fist to knock on the door.

"Coming!" Mrs. LaRusso's voice called. The door opened and she stood there all smiles. "Hey Johnny!" she said moving out of the way. It was night and day from the first time he'd come by. "Daniel's just finishing packing."

Johnny handed the paper over to her that Jimmy gave her. "The address and number for the place we're staying."

"Oh perfect! Thank you, Johnny," she said taking it and tacking it onto the fridge under a tourist magnet of the grand canyon. "So you excited? A trip out in the mountains with friends just sounds like so much fun."

"Yeah," Johnny said.

"Daniel's so excited. He loves snow. He's been complaining all winter," she laughed. "So thank you, I thought I was about to lose it. Which mountain are you going to?"

"Mountain High, it's about two hours, a little less, it depends on traffic," Johnny said.

"Do you ski?"

"I know how to, and board," Johnny said.

Sid took them a lot when he was a kid because some executive or something liked to go. He made Johnny do all the classes, bought him the nicest equipment, and then when Johnny got into it, liked it and things went south with the executive Sid broke it all and threw it in the trash.

Johnny had bought a board a year or two ago with his allowance and Sid got pissed about something and the board was broken. He hadn't bothered to replace it.

"Oh!" she said putting her hands on his forearms. "I nearly forgot!" she turned and opened the fridge and pulled out a large container covered in foil and pressed it into Johnny's hands. "This should keep, my best lasagna," she said with a grin. "350 for 30 minutes okay?"

"Ma!" Daniel said, his voice a whine, he had his bag over his shoulder. "I told you you didn't have to bake lasagna."

She laughed. "You guys are going to be so busy you won't even think of food until you are all starving and cranky. A good home-cooked meal already in the car will curb some bickering. I remember being young once you know."

"Thanks, Mrs. LaRusso," Johnny said turning to the door and opening it, carefully holding the lasagna under his arm.

She stopped Daniel at the door. "You promise me you'll be careful with your knee, right? I don't want you doing anything to hurt that knee worse, you promise me." Her voice was full of fear and worry and there was steel in it, her fingers were digging into his arms.

"Yeah Ma, I'm not going to ski or anything. I'm just going to enjoy the snow okay? Don't worry."

"You'll keep him out of trouble?" she asked turning her gaze on Johnny.

Johnny nodded. "Yes ma'am."

She nodded, and then her hands rose off of Daniel's arms and cupped his face kissing his forehead in the most embarrassing and loud motherly way possible and Johnny smirked as Daniel let out a scandalized sound.

"Ma!" he cried, pulling away.

"I love you," she called.

"Yeah, Love you too," he mumbled, rubbing his forehead with the back of his hand sourly hurrying down the steps. When they reached the gate he turned back to Johnny so suddenly he nearly bumped into him.

"Did she leave lipstick?" he whispered.

"No," Johnny said.

Daniel relaxed relieved and then pushed the gate open.

Bobby hauled the door open again and Jimmy was resting against the window, hand hanging out tapping the side of the van. He grinned at the two of them. "Hey, what's that?" he called pointing at what was in Johnny's hands.

"Mrs. LaRusso made us homemade lasagna," Johnny called back.

"Oh hell yeah!" Dutch yelled from the driver's seat. "Throw your stuff in the trunk. There's a cooler, see if the lasagna fits."

Johnny nodded popping the back.

Daniel found a spot amongst their bags to set his and Johnny opened the cooler full of melting ice, beer, and soda. There were a couple of

sealed packets of marinated steak at the bottom and Johnny set the lasagna carefully on top. Daniel had stepped back and seemed to be waiting to follow Johnny, so he shut the cooler and the trunk, making sure it latched properly before heading around to the side that Bobby had open and waiting for them.

Bobby hadn't curled his feet under him this time so they had to climb over him, he looked too pleased with himself.

"Bastard," Johnny muttered to him before flopping into the back.

Daniel sank down next to him and Johnny glanced over. They'd moved some cooler onto the seat so that the only open space was next to each other. He shot a glare to the front where Dutch was watching with a grin on his face.

"Alright, we've got everybody right? No one forgot anything? We're doing a straight shot into the mountains, any of you get sick I'll murder you. But if you let me know before you do I'll pull over and you can empty your guts on the side of the road. But I *will* take it as an affront to my driving," Dutch called as Bobby slide the door shut. "Some van rules, no drinking in here, no eating, it's like a 2-hour drive, you'll live, no complaining about the music, suck it up dolls. No complaining about my driving. No back seat driving. Just mind your pretty heads. The only one who can argue with me is in the navigator's seat and even this bastard has to be careful because he's in reach. If you piss me off I will pull over and we will tussle. It's a long ride all together, so try to be chill. Do not complain about the van. Do not diss the van. Or you can walk home. Got it?"

Johnny sighed sinking into his seat, he caught Daniel nodding beside him, taking Dutch seriously.

The music went up and Johnny wrinkled his nose but bit back a comment as ABBA started to play. Dutch was grinning widely. His van, his rules, he could torture them with his music choices all he wanted and Johnny knew he collected everything.

Who knew what tapes he had upfront, jazz, country, disco, polka. Dutch would listen to anything and if he had two hours of them at his mercy he would show none. It was going to be a long ride.

He propped his elbow against the window and looked out at Reseda and the rest of LA, the palm trees as they made their way through the busy Friday night traffic.

Tommy shifted in the seat in front of him and turned, he caught a look out of the corner of his eye like a roll of his eyes before he put a smile on his face.

"How much snow does Jersey get?" Tommy asked.

"Like 28 inches every winter," Daniel said.

"Shit," Tommy said eyes wide. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, I don't know how you guys can call this winter."

Bobby laughed turning as well. "How did you not freeze every year? How cold does it get?"

"Between mid-twenties and like from October to May it usually is barely ever up to 70."

"Damn," Bobby said. "Fucking freezing man. So what, do you not get hot summers?"

"Anything above 94 is rare," Daniel said.

"So you died last summer. You ready this year?" Tommy asked.

"No, but I also miss the rain. It like never rains here," Daniel said. "You guys get like nothing from the sky. No snow, no rain."

"Clear skies almost all the time," Bobby said.

Johnny turned to look at him, he was grinning. "Smooth sailing."

"I mean we get the Santa Ana winds," Tommy said.

"What's that?"

"You haven't noticed how windy it's been?" Bobby asked amused.

Daniel frowned. "Is this like snipe hunting?"

"The winds come from autumn until spring bringing heat and messing with the weather and the humidity. They also spread fires. It's a California weather thing," Bobby said.

"What's a snipe?" Johnny asked turning to Daniel whose face broke out in a grin.

Jimmy had turned down the volume of the radio.

Daniel shifted in his seat, bringing his left ankle under his right knee and it pushed his knee against Johnny's. He looked absolutely deviously delighted and Johnny worried that he'd just asked something stupid and he quickly flicked his gaze to Bobby and Tommy who were listening just as carefully. They didn't know either. Dutch was looking back occasionally curiously.

"A snipe is this small rodent that lives in the woods and is nocturnal," Daniel said voice loud enough to be heard through the van. "They're incredibly rare, so it's hard to find them, but we'd go out at summer camps to try and catch them. You break up into groups, someone in the group with a bag of some kind, low to the ground, and then everyone else tries to make enough of a ruckus in the woods to send it running in the direction of the people waiting to catch it."

"Are they worth a lot?" Jimmy called from the front.

"Well they are rare," Daniel said with a shrug.

"You ever catch one?" Bobby asked.

"No, they're too fast," Daniel said.

"So if we went to Jersey, in the woods, we could try to catch one?"

"I think they're in most of the woods in North America," Daniel said thoughtfully.

"Huh, my uncle hunts, he's never mentioned snipes."

"Probably too small for him to be worth it."

Johnny watched Daniel curiously. His eyes were sparkling with delight.

"You gonna take us snipe hunting this summer, LaRusso?" Dutch called from the front.

"I mean if you really want, but you won't like it," he called back.

"That boring? Like fishing?" Dutch called back.

"Worse," Daniel said.

"Worse," Dutch repeated. "What the hell is worse than fishing?"

Daniel looked like he was holding in laughter, absolutely too pleased.

"It's fake isn't it?" Johnny asked suspiciously.

Daniel turned to him and dissolved into a fit of giggles.

"Wait, it's fake?" Bobby asked. "Do people not actually go snipe hunting?"

Daniel brushed tears of mirth from his eyes. "No they do, but it's like a joke," he breathed. "The people who are supposed to chase the snipe usually just go home."

"Damn," Jimmy said.

He'd pulled out a book and was passing it back to Bobby who studied the open page then turned to Daniel. "Okay so a snipe hunt is a joke, and it's a rodent? What about this thing?" he opened a book of birds at a spotted brown bird with a long beak, "This thing is real though right?"

Daniel took the book and studied the bird. "I mean I didn't know about it but yeah same name. If you're hunting the bird it's real, if you find yourself in the woods holding a bag at night, then uh no, you've been tricked."

Bobby sighed. "Damn, Jersey's tricky."

"Really it's like a summer camp thing," Daniel said with a grin. "Or scouts. My cousin got tricked about it in the scouts when he was little and they went camping. He turned to Johnny. "How'd you know?"

"You looked like you were hiding something," Johnny said softly.

Daniel laughed at this hand coming down to Johnny's knee. "I'm going to have to work on that. I didn't know I had a tell."

"Yeah maybe don't play poker," Johnny said amused, the hand stayed.

He caught the look that was exchanged between Tommy and Bobby and flushed. He didn't know how to tell them that this was just how Daniel was. Touchy. He invaded your personal space and set up camp there.

They fought him, they should've known. But they were going to take it out of context. He was sure if either of them were in the back seat instead, Daniel would do the same thing. He wasn't special. He just

was there.

"So your Mom made us lasagna," Bobby offered as a change of subject.

"Yeah," Daniel said awkwardly. "She likes to cook, especially for groups. I guess it's an Italian thing."

"350 for thirty minutes," Johnny said, mostly in case he forgot so he wasn't the only one who knew what she'd told him.

Bobby nodded.

"That's great, I'm excited to try it," Bobby said. "My parents sent me with a ton of sweets."

Daniel smiled.

Jimmy rose his hand. "Yeah and mine sent me with drinks. Which reminds me, Johnny those sodas you asked about are coming in next week 'kay?"

"Thanks," Johnny called back.

"I brought steak," Tommy said with a grin. "My uncle got this deal on a bunch and my aunt marinated it and sealed it, so it should be good. I think Johnny's the only one who didn't bring anything."

"Hey," Johnny said sourly. "No one said to bring anything."

"You just brought your pretty self," Dutch laughed from the front. "And Daniel, so you get a pass this time."

Johnny frowned, he didn't have anything to bring with him. He couldn't take food from the fridges, the staff would notice and tell Sid. He didn't have time to buy anything. His mom gave him money to pay for Daniel if he wanted to do something, but all the things she mentioned were things he'd promised Mrs. LaRusso he wouldn't let Daniel do.

He brought cassettes but Dutch would get offended if he offered those. His van his music. He got that, he had the same rule with the Avanti.

Daniel gave his leg a squeeze and he glanced over.

Daniel had moved, was leaning against him.

Johnny turned back to look out the window as they passed the start of the mountains, and along the Santa Clara River, crossing it and up towards Palmdale.

He was doing his very hardest not to sling his arm around Daniel's shoulder, to not move, not wanting to scare him off, not wanting to see the looks he was sure the guys were making.

Chapter End Notes

28 inches = 71 centimeters/ 0.7 meters

20 degrees Fahrenheit is about -6 Celcius
70 F is about 20 C
94 F is about 34 C

Info on the Santa Ana winds: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Ana_winds

Song from the TV Show "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend" about the Santa Ana winds (no spoilers for the show, just a song about the wind with subtitles available that are accurate): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5XdQ5q2PIA

Snipe hunting is a practical joke in North America. It's kind of hazing (a kind of mean practical joke). I've been tricked into doing it when I was little and went camping with classmates. You can read more about it here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snipe_hunt

Snipes however are also the name of a bird which is a different thing. You can read about the bird and see what it looks like here: https://www.britannica.com/animal/snipe

Not Ready Yet

The mountains rose and Daniel couldn't take his eyes off of them, they were stunning. The weather changed the higher they went, it got cooler, he could see snow on the peaks.

The guys were talking about the things they could do, skiing was on their list, and snowboarding.

He felt Johnny tense beside him again and puzzled over it.

Then he remembered Johnny promising that he'd keep Daniel out of trouble, which meant keeping him from doing anything dangerous related to his knee.

"Hey Bobby," Johnny said.

Bobby paused mid-sentence and turned back to Johnny. It was weird to see it in action, the way they listened when Johnny spoke. The way the van fell quiet.

"You got that pamphlet of things to do at the resort?" Johnny asked.

"Uh yeah," Bobby said digging through a bag at his feet and pulling out a brochure, and passing it back.

Johnny took it and Daniel scooted closer to take a look.

Johnny flicked it open, skipping past the glossy photos of people skiing and snowboarding and the lessons and prices and trails.

"Snowmobile," Johnny said quietly, tapping on the image of a lime green machine, "Kawasaki invader could rent those."

Daniel glanced at the price but Johnny had put his thumb over it.

"How expensive is it?" he asked uneasily.

"I got it," Johnny said, flicking the page and Daniel frowned and pulled away a little.

Johnny glanced over. "My mother wanted to cover it since it's your first trip out with us. If I go home and tell her I didn't treat you to anything she'll be pissed at me."

"We've also booked thermal pools," Tommy said. "My family's got this season pass for that, so that's covered."

Bobby turned, he made eye contact with Johnny and Daniel caught Johnny out of the corner of his eye, tilting his head pointedly and the look on Bobby's face was stricken but he quickly recovered.

"We should do that for sure. I heard it's great for injuries and whatnot."

"Smooth," Johnny muttered shaking his head.

"I'll be okay," Daniel said quickly. "Don't worry about me. Enjoy your skiing and snowboarding."

"Huh?" Dutch asked.

"His knee, remember dumbass?" Jimmy asked with a sigh. "We fucking forgot."

"Fuck," Dutch said. "Well hey man, we're still going to have great food and the lodge has this bar that doesn't card. You can get a boozy hot chocolate, it's amazing."

"Don't worry," Daniel said again with a small smile. "I'm just excited to see snow again."

"Easy to please," Dutch said. "I like that."

He didn't sound quite convinced but Daniel couldn't keep saying it. It sucked, but his mother would kill him if she found out that he made his knee more messed up by skiing or snowboarding.

He also couldn't let them change all their plans because of him.

The snowmobile sounded like fun though even if he felt bad because it would probably be expensive. Everything was always expensive.

He watched them enter a wooded road and leave the main road, the road cleared but snow piled up along the edges. They made their way up to a large wooden building. Cabin came to Daniel's mind but it was bigger than any cabin he'd ever seen. It had to be a lodge. There weren't any other cars even though it looked like it could fill many.

"Already gentlemen, we're here, la tercera casa de Jimmy," Dutch said parking. "Everyone out, grab your shit, and let's get in. Jimmy go unlock the place will ya?"

The passenger seat opened and a cold wind filled the van followed by shouts of complaints and curses from the other guys.

Daniel grinned, he couldn't wait to feel the crunch of snow beneath his feet.

Jimmy had run, bolting up to the front door, bouncing from one foot to the other while he unlocked the door.

"Oh god I'm not ready," Bobby complained. "Brace yourselves." He pushed the door open and the bit of cold from earlier hit like a wall as he slid the door open and stepped out, letting out a string of curses and shoving his hands under his arms.

Johnny undid his seatbelt and Daniel hurried to get out, moving ahead of him and hopping out of the van, making sure he landed on his good knee, before hurrying to the trunk to gather his bag.

Johnny had the cooler from the seat under his arms with a frown on his face. His face started turning pink from the cold and it was like when he blushed.

Daniel tried to grab the other cooler but his momentary distraction of taking in Johnny made him too slow and Tommy had it and was jogging towards the lodge, shouting the whole way about who liked this shit, why'd they do this to themselves, why'd they pack all their jackets like idiots.

Johnny's bag was the only one left and he bent down to retrieve it.

Daniel hooked his other hand through his own bag to keep his hands to himself. He'd promised himself he'd be good on this trip. And he'd already failed. He'd already put his hands on Johnny's leg like he did when they were at Mr. Miyagi's or alone. It'd become a habit before he even realized it. He couldn't touch Johnny's arm. He hadn't figured out how high on his arm made him flinch. But it just wasn't worth the attempt. His leg was safe, if not a little weird.

Johnny shut the trunk.

"You really like the cold this much? Let's go inside before we freeze huh?" Johnny asked.

Daniel turned and hurried towards the lodge. They'd all moved so fast and he kept getting stuck, eyes glued to Johnny.

It was just that he couldn't believe they were actually here, together. He'd been invited to this and he'd been so excited all week. His mother had been excited all week. Relieved he was getting out and having fun. Though he knew she was nervous. He'd survived the party, but his relationship with Ali had exploded so his mother was worried about what sort of fallout would happen with six teenage boys alone in a lodge in the mountains.

She'd whispered quietly to him over dinner that it sounded like "lord of the flies" waiting to happen.

He was pretty sure if Johnny hadn't won her over, if he hadn't kept showing up and helping out and proving himself reliable then she wouldn't have let him go.

He wondered if he was subconsciously sticking to Johnny's side specifically because of that. As if her concern was infectious.

He'd been so relieved that the seat in the van available was next to Johnny. More relieved than excited. He'd gotten worried about the snipe hunting, that they'd get pissed at him for the joke. But being next to Johnny made him feel safe.

He wondered when that switch had flipped.

He knew his mother had the same feeling, it was why she'd asked Johnny to keep an eye on him like Johnny was taking him out on a date.

He blushed.

There was no way his mother would let him out on a date like this, alone in the mountains. But that was part of the excitement. He'd get to see Johnny first thing in the morning, late in the evening. They'd be around each other outside of school, away from Mr. Miyagi or their parents, or the kids from school. Just Johnny and his friends and Daniel. It was the perfect place for Daniel to work on the foundation of their relationship, charm Johnny's friends, work on settling roots, find a place for himself.

The inside of the lodge was stunning. High ceilings and chandeliers with a large stone fireplace next to a bunch of seating. There were a couple of couches and chairs around it with a low table, large glass doors that looked out at the mountains and the snow and the trees. The kitchen was where the guys were carefully unpacking the coolers.

Johnny set the cooler he'd been carrying a little heavily down on the counter and the other guys looked at him with grins, Dutch took it and carried it away.

It was empty Daniel realized as Dutch stored it in a cabinet.

Bobby was turning on the oven to 350 and he was holding the lasagna carefully. He turned and looked around the room, eyes catching Daniel's.

"Hey, do I remove the foil or does it stay on?"

"Leave it on," Daniel said.

Bobby nodded, turning and setting the dish gently on the countertop. Sodas and beer were being added to the empty fridge along with the steak. Cookies and containers of other sweets were being set onto another counter then Jimmy leaned back and sighed, clapping his hands together.

"So I was thinking," he said slowly. "Tomorrow the resort, which we've got passes for, offers a buffet breakfast, so let's say we head out at 8?"

Dutch let out a groan. "Seriously? 8?"

"What you wanna go at 7?" Jimmy asked, teasing.

"Hell no, 8 is fine," Dutch grumbled.

"Do I need-" Daniel began wondering about the passes and logistics but Jimmy shook his head.

"Nah you're covered, the pass is for everyone in the van. They go by car."

"Oh, thanks," Daniel said.

Bobby turned from the stove and looked at Tommy whose hands were free. "How about you put our shit in our rooms while we're unpacking the food?"

"Oh, right," Tommy said scooping up the bags that had been discarded on the floor and over his shoulder.

Johnny quickly picked up his bag before Tommy got it. "I'll carry my own, just tell me what you guys decided on."

Tommy didn't respond and Johnny followed him stiffly down the hall. Daniel looked between groups and turned following the two out into the hall.

"So," Tommy began. "Bathroom here," he said tapping a door with his foot.

He pushed open a door next to him and opened it throwing a bag in. "And Dutch is in that one."

He continued down the hall and pushed the door next open. "And Bobby will be here." The bag was slung in.

He climbed up the stairs and tapped another door. "Bathroom," he said.

He pushed open the next door. "Jimmy" he said throwing the bag in.

Daniel noticed Johnny stiffened at that, like that room choice had been a surprise. It had looked like a nice room from the glimpse Daniel had gotten.

Tommy went down to the end of the hall and shoved another door open and threw in the last bag, "Me," he said.

Tommy brushed past them and then hopped back down the stairs, they followed and out past the kitchen and the large glass doors to the patio. He opened a door, "Office, where one of the phones is. Other is in the kitchen. Same number, same line."

He opened another door "Rec room," there was a pool table and another wet bar, it reminded Daniel of the one he'd played charades in with Dutch and Johnny.

Next door opened. "Linen closet, clean towels, toilet paper, you know, stuff." He shut it.

The next set of doors were a double set and his hands fell onto the doorknobs heavily before pushing them open with a flourish.

"You two are here," he said.

The room was big, with a large window overlooking the mountains, the view was stunning and Daniel was so distracted by it that what Tommy had said didn't register.

"What about the room in the basement?" Johnny was saying.

"They're remodeling, it's not habitable at the moment," Tommy said, he sounded apologetic.

There was a big bed along one of the walls.

"We figured this way Daniel didn't have to take the stairs. You know Dutch can't work stairs when he's drunk and Bobby has to keep him in check. And you've slept with like all of us in your bed before, so like it's not a big deal, *right Johnny*?"

There was something in his tone that Daniel couldn't place. He had a million questions bubbling up as he came back to reality and pulled his gaze away from the view. As the words settled in as a reality.

This was the room he was staying in. And he was staying in it with Johnny. Tommy was expecting them to share the bed like it was nothing, a non-issue. Apparently, it was an ex-cobra sleepover thing to share beds. Completely platonically. Johnny was used to it. Which meant it meant nothing and the rapid way his heart was beating in his chest meant it was only a big deal for Daniel.

It meant that he'd not just see Johnny early in the morning and late at night, but that he'd be right next to him all through the night.

He'd see what Johnny looked like when he slept if it was that same peaceful look he had in the doctor's office's waiting room.

He never would've dreamed they'd put them in a room together unless it was bunk beds or something like that.

But this was, different. This was intimate, even if it wasn't.

He breathed and set his bag down gently at the foot of the bed.

He was going to remain calm, if he wasn't calm about it then they'd move someone, Johnny would offer to sleep somewhere else, he'd get scared off and Daniel wanted this.

Now that he knew it was an option he refused to let it slip through his fingers.

Screw being unable to ski or snowboard, he'd get to be alone, utterly alone with Johnny.

He needed to not look too excited, he needed to act like this wasn't a big deal. Because he had to calm the fuck down because this wasn't a

big deal. Heck, his grandparents made him and Louie share a bed until they were like 13 whenever they visited. It was the same. Okay, it *wasn't* the same, but the thought helped.

He turned and Tommy was waiting, leaning against the door.

"Okay," Daniel said with a shrug. "The view is stunning," he said jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

Tommy grinned. "Right? Okay, so there's an ensuite bathroom in here," he said crossing the room quickly and throwing open a door that revealed a pretty decent-sized bathroom. "So yeah, unpack and what not. You said it's thirty minutes right? So like thirty minutes until dinner probably," Tommy said with a shrug. "I mean you got problems or need anything Johnny will be here, so yeah," he said, "So ask him." and then he was gone, leaving one of the doors open and slipping out down the hall.

Daniel stared at the doors. "Two doors is kind of weird for a bedroom right?"

"Yeah, I think they just liked how it opened. You gotta do the thing Tommy did. It's like the whole point."

"So does Jimmy usually take this room?" Daniel asked scooping up his bag and unzipping it to carefully unpack his jacket and boots and set them in the closet, hanging his jacket up.

"Yeah," Johnny said turning to his own bag. He paused and then turned to Daniel. "You really okay with this?"

"Sure," Daniel said. "I mean it makes sense right? Logically? What else would they do? Put Dutch and Bobby in here?" He was taking a shot in the dark based on what Tommy had said and apparently it hit because Johnny smirked and shook his head.

"Well, you got a side you gotta sleep on?" Johnny asked motioning to the bed.

"Nope, I'm flexible," Daniel said carefully setting out his sweaters, everything smelled like the old apartment, like Newark and it was a little overwhelming.

Made him a little homesick. They'd lived there his whole life, it's where they'd lived with his dad. He understood why they'd moved, but it felt like they'd left Dad behind and he hated it. But he couldn't

tell his mother that, it'd just hurt her.

"You okay?" Johnny asked and Daniel looked at him, he was crouched next to where Daniel was.

His fingers were digging into the sweater, holding it tightly. His mother had set a couple of his fathers aside for him, and he'd brought one because it looked nice and now he regretted it. The smell was fading.

He shook his head and tried to crack a smile. "It's silly," he said.

Johnny shifted back and sat down on the ground, like he wasn't going anywhere, was all ears. Daniel sighed and looked back at his sweater, running his fingers over it.

"Ma kept a bunch of Dad's stuff for me, and, well they've been in storage for so long, that it wasn't until I opened them that I realized how much they've retained the smell. It smells like him still. I'm kind of regretting bringing it, because if I wear it, everything will smell like my Dad, and then the smell will go away. It's already kind of fading."

"We can put it in a plastic bag or something," Johnny said. "I'm sure there's something around here."

"I think I'm not ready yet."

Johnny nodded and was up, opening drawers and then heading out into the hall, Daniel heard doors open and close, the soft sound of Johnny talking. He felt like he should get up and move, help find something to put his Dad's sweater in. But he couldn't move.

If he moved he'd cry and he couldn't kick off this trip with tears. He refused.

He ducked his head and breathed in his Dad's cologne. He remembered his mother kept a bottle of it in her room. He'd always thought it was strange, but he got it now.

He tried to remember the good times when his Dad was healthy when they gone out as a family, before he got sick. He'd avoided looking at his Dad's stuff because it always made him think of being in the hospital, of the smells of the hospital, how frail his hand had gotten when Daniel had tried to hold it.

Footsteps approached and Johnny held out a big clothing bag and

some duck tape. Daniel turned and carefully slipped the sweater into the plastic Johnny held open to him. Johnny ripped the duck tape off with his teeth and quickly sealed the rest of it off. He checked it for openings, then once it was completely sealed looked up at Daniel.

"If you need an extra sweater, I brought extras, you can borrow one of mine, it might be too big," he said unsure.

Daniel smiled softly, reaching out and covering Johnny's hand in his.

"Thanks." he said.

He closed his eyes and breathed.

Johnny didn't move. Johnny stayed just like he thought Johnny would.

The smell of his mother's lasagna filled the lodge and that mixed with his father's cologne brought tears to his eyes but he blinked them back.

"Yeah, one of your sweaters would be great if that's okay."

Johnny leaned over rather than remove his hand from under Daniel's and hooked his duffle bag and dragged it over. With his free hand he dug around past his walkman and cassettes and Daniel spotted a few books, a beginners guide to Japanese, a beginners guide to mechanics, and a book on piloting. He pulled a few sweaters to the top.

"I'll..uh..just set them out, grab whichever one you want," he said after a while.

"Dinner kids!" Came Dutch's yell down the hall.

Daniel pulled his hand back and stood carefully, putting his hand out to the edge of the wardrobe to help pull himself up off the floor, to keep his weight off his knee.

Johnny scooped up his bag and quickly set out the sweaters on the top of a chest nearby and Daniel gently nudged his own bag out of the way and along the wall. His father's sweater safely tucked away.

Johnny turned the light back off and shut the doors before following Daniel.

The guys were around a kitchen table with two seats saved for Johnny and Daniel, it was a round table and the chairs were cramped next to

each other.

The lasagna was sitting in the center, cut carefully and Bobby was filling plates.

"What do you want to drink?" Johnny asked softly as Daniel sunk into one of the empty seats next to Jimmy.

"Soda, uh surprise me?" Daniel said remembering that Jimmy had brought a bunch of sodas he probably wouldn't recognize.

"Let him try the pineapple one," Jimmy recommended.

Johnny wrinkled his nose at that. "Your pairing recommendations need work, lasagna and pineapple?"

Jimmy shrugged. "The pineapple is good though."

"Yeah, no," Johnny said turning to walk to the fridge.

"LaRusso this smells amazing," Dutch said.

"It's probably molten hot, so be careful," Daniel warned.

He'd been burned so many times by his mother's lasagna, getting too excited to wait to dig in.

Johnny returned with a look of triumph setting a yellow bottles in front of himself and twisted off a cap handing it over to Daniel. Daniel started to grin thinking Johnny had caved and gone for pineapple, but he looked at the bottle in his hands, it had a lemon on it and the writing was in Italian.

"Hey! This is from Italy!" he said excitedly.

"Oh I totally forgot we had those," Jimmy said, an appraising look falling on Johnny.

The others were drinking beers and Daniel didn't care.

He turned to Johnny, "My grandmother used to have these."

He hadn't seen them outside of her house, like ever.

"Yeah, they good?" Johnny asked, bottle hovering to his lips.

"They are. I haven't seen them in a long time."

"I can get you some if you want," Jimmy offered.

"Really?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah, it's easy. Plus, does your mom like them?"

"She does," Daniel said.

"Then I gotta, this lasagna is delicious," Jimmy said around a mouthful.

Daniel grinned, pleased on his mother's behalf. She'd be delighted.

Conversation bubbled up around the table, about their favorite sodas, talking about the weirdest ones they'd found in Jimmy's fridge. Apparently pickle was the winning odd one.

They were so close that Daniel found himself brushing against Johnny frequently, their arms kept touching, their thighs were pressed against each other and it was comforting. To know he was there without having to look at him.

They finished the entire lasagna and Daniel filed that away to tell his mother, not a scrap was left behind.

Bobby hopped up to set it in the sink to soak before returning with a plate of cookies. Just like every other sweet Bobby had handed to Daniel it was delightful.

The conversation was easy and friendly and full of laughter and Daniel felt a lot of the tension fade from his shoulders. He'd been so worried, about everything. That he'd just be tagging along and pitied, but they seemed to constantly pull him into the conversation, curious about what he had to say, teasing but not roughly. After awhile Daniel's hand fell to Johnny's knee again while they talked, reassuring himself that he was there even though he was quiet by his side, wanting to remind him that Daniel was there too, and it wasn't a dream that he could sit with the ex-cobras without teachers or parents around and for it to go okay, for them to just talk.

After a while when the cookies dwindled Jimmy hopped up and into the living room, opening a cabinet and pulling out a box, that he came back with.

He popped it open and set down a board. "We've got six pieces and six people, how about a game of Monopoly?"

"You always lose, you remember that right?" Johnny asked leaning forward.

Daniel looked at him, there was a competitive spark in his eyes and a smirk on his lips, it made his stomach do a flip flop, that look usually had meant danger, but this was monopoly, not a fight. It'd been a while since he'd seen that look.

"Every day is a new day, with new chances to win, and for one of us to take you down Johnny," Jimmy said with a grin, setting up the board.

"The usual?" Johnny asked.

"Always," Jimmy said.

Daniel looked between the two of them confused.

"Loser does the dishes," Tommy explained.

"Winner gets a free drink at the bar," Dutch added.

"Johnny always wins," Bobby said with a sigh, "every single time. We thought he cheated, but we've searched him multiple times and came up with nothing."

"Because I don't cheat," Johnny said stiffly.

"Yeah, yeah, we know," Jimmy said. "Just prepare to lose Lawrence."

It'd been a while since Daniel had played Monopoly. But there was something fun about the competitive nature in the air that wasn't venomous or directed at him. Everyone was so focused on Johnny that before Daniel knew it, half the table was bankrupt and out.

Dutch lost first, groaning and getting up to wash the dishes, complaining the whole time.

Then Bobby and Tommy shortly one after another.

"Yo, Daniel, got a number? I'm gonna call parents who want called to let them know we made it here okay before it gets too late," Bobby said grabbing the phone from the kitchen.

"Thank you," Daniel said, and scribbled his number on a scrap of paper that was offered to him. "Ma would like that."

"Awesome," Bobby said taking it and settling down at a seat next to

the phone. "Hi, yeah, it's me. Yeah. Tell Mom and Dad we made it. Cookies were demolished already. So tell them the recipe is good. Uh huh, of course. Yup, you too. Night."

Jimmy went bankrupt on the next turn and put his head in his hands. Groaning and getting up to go to the phone.

"Give me that I'll call my own parents, thank you."

"Fine, fine," Bobby said backing off and returning to the table to watch as Johnny and Daniel played.

"Huh," he said.

"Huh, what huh?" Dutch called.

"Daniel's going to win," Bobby responded.

"What? No, Mom, not talking to you, yeah sorry, I didn't mean to yell. I know. I know. Yes, thank you. We made it. Yes, okay. Sorry again. Good night," Jimmy said hanging up and hurrying back over. "What do you mean?"

"Well look," Bobby said as Johnny rolled the dice and moved his piece onto one of Daniel's properties and forked over most of his cash. "Johnny's losing."

"Oh fuck yeah, *finally*," Jimmy said. "I'm tired of buying that bastard drinks."

It took four more rounds but Johnny was bankrupt. Johnny leaned back against his chair hard and it teetered but didn't fall and he hung his head over the back.

"I should've known," he muttered, "He was too quiet."

The sound of cheering was shocking to Daniel but he grinned. He didn't particularly care about the drink. But it was kind of fun how into it they got. And Johnny reached over and put his hand on his shoulder.

"You're alright LaRusso," he said with a smirk.

And Daniel felt his heart pound suddenly in his ears until he heard Tommy on the phone.

"Hi, yes Mrs. LaRusso. This is Tommy. Wanted to let you know we

made it safely. The lasagna was great ma'am. Daniel just won a game of monopoly so that's the hubbub, one moment. Daniel, want to talk to your Mom?" Tommy called.

Daniel jumped up and hurried over, taking the phone from Tommy and curling away from the group as far as the cord could let him. He hadn't thought about it when Bobby asked, had been so engrossed by the game, but after hearing it, hearing Tommy talk to his mother made him panic. She'd think they'd killed him and stuffed his body somewhere to not be found until the summer.

"Hey Ma, sorry," Daniel said quickly. "There's one line so they started calling families to let them know we got here safely to get through it all before people went to bed."

He heard her let out a deep breath.

"Sorry Ma," he repeated. "I wasn't even thinking."

"So they liked the lasagna huh?" she asked.

"They did, plates all clean, not smidge left. Popped it in the oven as soon as we stepped foot in the lodge."

"You're safe right?" she asked. "Like they're being nice?"

"Yeah. And the snow is real pretty."

"Good. It sounded like Monopoly was a big deal."

"Uh yeah, apparently Johnny's never lost," Daniel said.

He heard his mother laughing. "I guess this time you didn't kick him in the face. I like this better. Are there competitive monopoly tournaments?"

Daniel laughed. "No, no I don't think so. Listen Ma, I think the other guys have to call home too. I think they only got through half, so I gotta go. I'm fine, really. Love you, good night."

"I love you too. Sleep well."

He listened for the click and then turned and hung the phone up. It was picked up by Tommy again who moved on to his own call.

"So, looks like we owe Daniel a drink tomorrow. What a relief," Dutch said stretching. "Y'all I'm beat, we played for like 4 hours and some

bastard wants us out the door at 8, so I'm going to bed."

"Yeah, that's probably for the best," Jimmy said with a smug grin when Dutch punched him on the shoulder on his way out.

"Sleep well," Dutch said waving and dipping into his room.

The group dissipated and Daniel headed down the separate hall to their room, listening to Johnny walk behind him.

Johnny stopped and waited and Daniel wondered why and then Daniel put his hands on the doorknobs and pushed them open.

"Okay, yeah that is kind of fun." he said walking into the room. "uh, where can I find the lights?" Daniel asked, it was pitch dark.

He felt a hand reach out and find his shoulder.

"Don't move, I'll get it," Johnny said and Daniel heard him move past him and into the room.

It was so dark but his eyes adjusted and he watched the shadowy movement of Johnny as he moved towards the bed.

"Brace yourself," Johnny warned and Daniel closed his eyes.

The light turned on and he winced then slowly opened them.

"Are you a morning or night shower person?" Johnny asked.

"Morning," Daniel said.

"You can use the bathroom first then," Johnny said moving towards where his bag was and crouching next to it to go through his things, carefully picking out the cassette tapes and setting them out.

Daniel grabbed his bag and darted into the bathroom. Getting ready for bed felt strange in such a big bathroom. The house was so quiet, everything was too quiet. No sounds of the city, no neighbors. It felt like they were cut off from the world.

He shook his head to dislodge the thoughts. He wasn't by himself. Johnny was in the other room.

He brushed his teeth and washed his face, changing quickly into sleeping clothes, and pushed the door open to throw his bag back in the corner he'd claimed as his.

"All yours," Daniel said.

Johnny nodded strolling past him and into the bathroom and shutting the door.

Daniel looked around, took in the paintings on the wall, they were abstract and no matter how much he stared he couldn't make heads or tails of them. He looked out the window but he couldn't make out anything anymore, not with the light on.

He plopped down on the bed. The bedding beneath his fingers was incredibly soft. He liked his sheets at home, his own bed, but this was fancy, he pulled back the bedding and curled up on his side, feeling the weight of the day. They'd had school that day, a day full of classes. It felt like a different time. A time where Ali was avoiding him.

Even if he was still mad at her, it hurt. She'd been his only friend at school for his entire time there and the void she left was larger than he'd expected.

For some reason, Johnny had won over the entire female student body. He'd thought he was blacklisted or something weird like that. Something so totally bizarre but sad.

Yet all of sudden Johnny was swarmed every time Daniel saw him except at lunch. He couldn't remember ever seeing so many girls hang around Johnny. He'd never seen it before he realized and he wondered what had happened.

Was there only allowed to be one guy on the blacklist? Was it now Daniel?

Daniel stretched his hands behind his head and looked at the ceiling. It was fine if he was on the list he didn't care. But even before he was on the list the girls at school paid him no mind. Even before he and Ali were a sure thing. They ignored him. But he kind of got why they went after Johnny. Johnny was rich, or at least from a family in the hills. He drove a cool car, he was athletic, he was pretty. He was like a model for what people usually thought of as a Californian teenage boy. It was what he'd expected when they moved to California.

The karate had been a surprise though. He'd expected more surfers.

He could hear the water running and looked at the alarm clock. He needed fifteen minutes to shower and time to get dressed, if they were to be out the door by 8, he needed to be up at 7:30 at least. But he

wanted to talk to Johnny before setting an alarm. Make sure he was okay with that, or who knows, maybe to keep all that muscle Johnny got up earlier and did sit-ups or push-ups or something.

Daniel remembered seeing a guy in a gym in Jersey through the window, flirting with girls. He did push-ups but would ask the women to sit on his back while he did them. The girls giggled but obliged and the guy made it look easy.

He'd gone home and tried to do push-ups and he did a few but didn't manage to put on much muscle. Not enough that he could let someone sit on his back while he did it.

Louie once found a cat and dropped it on his back and that collapsed Daniel and he'd gotten a bunch of scratches all over his back to boot. But Johnny might be able to manage it.

The door opened and Daniel startled, sitting up as if he'd been caught as if the thought was something he needed to hide. Johnny was drying his hair with a towel that he hung up on the door before he let it hang ajar and then his eyes met Daniels.

"You didn't have to stay up," Johnny said.

"I didn't know what was polite," Daniel said with a shrug. "I mean apparently you all share beds all the time."

Oh god, why'd he said that? He'd been trying not to think about that.

Johnny sunk into the other side of the bed but didn't say anything.

"I mean this room is big enough for everyone to fit in it."

Stop Daniel, just stop, don't suggest stupid things or you might just get them.

"They just show up," Johnny said, lifting the covers and slipping his feet under them. "Usually when they're drunk and don't want their parents to know, they stumble in and pass out. There's no politeness to it. And believe me, you don't want them all in here."

"I was thinking of setting an alarm," Daniel said. "7:30 okay?"

"Yeah, that works," Johnny said.

Daniel picked up the alarm and fiddled with it setting one for 7:30am. He set it on the nightstand and then Johnny leaned over to his side

and flicked off the light. Daniel settled back down on his pillow.

"You okay?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah," Daniel said.

"You've been quiet."

Daniel frowned, had he? He hadn't felt like he was too quiet. Or quieter than normal. He heard Johnny shift, rolling onto his side facing him.

"Mrs. LaRusso okay?" he asked.

"Uh..yeah," Daniel said.

He sighed, Ali got upset because he held shit in until he just started snapping at her about stuff, for being half out and not facing things head-on.

"She's just concerned. I mean we both were worried. She's a Mom you know...and I should've been the one who called her, because I think someone calling her for me, scared her a little."

Johnny was quiet, listening.

"She uh...got worried, you know? 6 guys going out in the mountains, she only knows you, and last semester...I mean I couldn't hide all the bruises from her you know? And she was at the tournament. She heard everything, saw everything. She was worried about this going "lord of the flies" and I guess, I guess I got a little... a little....scared too. I don't know when that will stop, I mean I don't have nightmares anymore, and like when I see Bobby I don't immediately panic anymore and try to move so my knee is away from him. And I don't freeze up when Tommy comes near or Dutch starts laughing. There's progress but last semester wasn't easy. Ma probably won't really breathe easy until I'm home again. This was like a big deal, probably bigger than I thought, like much bigger. I mean Mr. Miyagi's not here if something happens you know, not like Halloween. So I guess I'm not talking because....part of me is still waiting for something bad to happen. For it to be a trick. To get hurt again."

Daniel held the comforter tightly between his hands, hugging it to his chest.

"What can I do to help?" Johnny asked.

He sounded so sincere. And 99% of Daniel believed him, but there was that 1% that had been burned so badly that it held out stubbornly. He liked Johnny. He liked Johnny *a lot*, probably more than anyone else, but that was when it was just him and Johnny, when the odds were more even. When they weren't stacked with Johnny and his friends. Because almost always it had been Johnny *with* his friends.

"I don't know," Daniel said softly shaking his head. "I wish I knew."

Johnny was quiet next to him and he wondered why he'd even admitted it. Admitted he was scared or worried. But Johnny wasn't making fun of him. He wondered for a moment if Johnny had fallen asleep but he looked over and could make out that his eyes were open.

"Hey, Johnny?"

"Yeah?"

"Where's the bonsai?" Daniel asked.

"Oh...Mr. Miyagi's babysitting it," Johnny said, his tone uneasy.

Daniel felt a familiar sting of jealousy. It'd been a constant companion lately. Jealous of seeing Johnny surrounded by girls and the confusion of whether it was jealousy over his popularity or a desire for the girls to go away, not wanting to share the attention. Jealous that Johnny had friends, that always had his back and that apparently just showed up whenever they wanted and he didn't push them out of his bed. It made this feel less special, or more one-sided in importance and he kept wrestling with that.

And now, much to his shame, he felt jealous over the bonsai that Johnny cared for so much, protected so much, because it was that same uneasy tone he recognized, the one that matched the look he'd given Daniel the first time he'd gone over, where Johnny had put himself between Daniel and the bonsai as if scared Daniel would try to take it back.

He had to say something, something to stop Johnny from going down that route again.

"That was smart, I don't know how bonsai do in the cold," Daniel said easily, smiling in the dark. "Hey, are you okay with me winning at monopoly? Everyone made it seem like it was a big deal."

Some of the tension left Johnny's shoulders. "Yeah I'd rather you win than Jimmy. Jimmy can be insufferable if he wins."

"Really?"

"Yeah, he always wins at battleship. But that's a two-person game so not something we'll end up playing during this trip," Johnny said.

"You play every night?"

"Yeah, probably Uno tomorrow."

There was so much Daniel wanted to say, he didn't want to stop talking, but he was tired. He yawned and Johnny shifted over onto his back.

"Sleep well Daniel, just think of all the snow you'll get to see tomorrow," Johnny said.

"Good night," Daniel said.

He wanted to hold off a little longer, wanted to take in the sound of Johnny's soft breathing next to him, the rise and fall of his chest, the smell of him freshly out of the shower, but his eyes grew heavy and before long he was asleep.

Fancy Snowmen? Sure I guess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny was in the dojo again, on his knees in front of the mirrors staring straight ahead without seeing.

Kreese was yelling at him.

He was being made an example of.

He knew something bad was coming but he dared not meet Kreese's eyes or move. If he did it'd be seen as a challenge and that would make things worse.

His friends weren't there.

He didn't recognize any of the students who were eating the lesson out of Kreese's hands. They wouldn't help him.

He could take the students, probably, if he wanted to make a run for it. But he couldn't take them *and* Kreese. Kreese would block the door while he fought the others. Until he was too tired and then it'd be over.

He heard something moving on the mats. It was coming towards him, shifting along the way.

Johnny glanced at it in the mirrors.

It was a snake, an anaconda. He was out of time.

It wrapped itself around him, the weight of it keeping him pinned to the mat as it curled around his torso, pinning his arms to his sides.

He looked up finally at Kreese who just looked smug. Challenge or no challenge, he couldn't fight or move. It didn't matter anymore.

"You see students, what happens when someone loses?" he asked. "You think you've choked before? Thought you were unable to breathe? That's nothing compared to having an anaconda crush your bones to dust. And a fallen star of a student, one who *thought* they were the best? One who is nothing but a disappointment? Who wasted *my*

time? Really there is nothing else to do, so watch students, watch what happens when you fail."

The snake continued to wrap around his chest and neck until Johnny couldn't move, couldn't breathe.

The students were watching, they were bloodthirsty, they believed everything Kreese said, they believed themselves better than Johnny, that they wouldn't make the same mistakes.

"What's our creedo?" Kreese asked.

"Strike first! Strike hard! No Mercy!" the students shouted and it was like thunder.

The snake's head rose up and Johnny met its eyes. Its tongue flicked out and brushed against Johnny's nose and then it opened its mouth.

Right before it struck Johnny's eyes flicked open, his heart was pounding and he waited.

He was at Jimmy's lodge.

It was Saturday.

He wasn't at the dojo.

He hadn't seen Kreese in nearly a month. He hadn't been near the dojo in about the same amount of time.

It was dark but there was some light, it was probably just pre-dawn.

He glanced at the clock. It was five in the morning.

There were arms around him, thin arms that had a tight grip around his chest. There was a gentle breath on the back of his neck, a warm body pressed tight against his back, and a leg was thrown over his hip.

Daniel.

He tried to shift, to see if he could slip out of the grip. But Daniel just moved his head in his sleep, making a small noise of complaint, and pressed his nose against the back of his neck.

He had spooned occasionally with Ali, but he'd always been the big spoon. The thought of switching it up had never occurred to him. It wasn't bad. But he'd never admit that. Not even to the bonsai.

Maybe to the bonsai.

But Daniel, despite being asleep, despite being smaller than Johnny, was doing his absolute best to just completely cover him.

The leg not thrown over his hip was pressed up against Johnny's. He really couldn't go anywhere. Completely stuck.

He had no way of moving without jostling Daniel, without possibly waking him up.

He wondered if he *should* wake up Daniel, try to pry him off of him.

He didn't want to.

He wondered how Daniel had managed it without waking him up until they'd reached this point.

How bad had the nightmare been that *this* hadn't woken him up?

Johnny could feel Daniel's heartbeat, steady against his back.

It was fine. He wasn't alone. Not like at the mansion.

Johnny's eyes felt heavy.

It didn't have to be dealt with now.

His eyes slid shut, it was nice.

He was too tired to even think about what to do.

So why bother?

Before he knew it he was asleep again.

Johnny woke up to the alarm.

Daniel let out a groan when he heard it, which was against his ear. Johnny squeezed his eyes again and bit the inside of his cheek.

Daniel rolled off of him slowly, like it wasn't a big deal, like he didn't want to get up, or stop holding onto Johnny.

Was it an Italian thing?

Was it because it was cold?

It was probably just a Daniel thing.

But the warmth left. Daniel was turning off the alarm and getting up. He heard the click of the bathroom light, the door shut, and then the sound of the shower.

Johnny sat up slowly and rubbed at his face. Grateful Daniel had just gone straight to shower. He had time to collect himself.

He got dressed, picking something warm to wear, and wondered whether he should wait for Daniel or head out to the kitchen.

He remembered what Daniel had said the night before, how he was still nervous around Johnny's friends, around the ex-cobras.

He remade the bed then sunk down on his side and put his headphones over his ears, listening to music and waiting.

He wondered if Daniel had nightmares about him, the way he had them about Kreese, he shuddered.

He hoped Daniel didn't. He hoped Daniel still slept soundly and safely in his dreams, not haunted by Johnny.

But Johnny had tormented Daniel for a long time.

It made him feel sick thinking that Johnny might be tormenting Daniel still in his subconscious, that his friends were.

He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the music, trying to calm down again.

He could still feel Daniel's breath on his neck, the way his lips had grazed his skin.

He tried to focus on his breathing.

Mr. Miyagi was always telling him to breathe.

Paint like this Johnny-san, up, down, breathe in, breathe out, good Johny-san. Sand like this, circular motions, remember to breathe. Always must remember to breathe.

With how touchy Daniel was while he was conscious he shouldn't have been surprised that Daniel was touchy in his sleep.

It wasn't like he was special.

He should probably curb stomp the feelings that were rising up like weeds.

He was sure, if Daniel wasn't still scared of his friends it would've been the same with them.

He felt footsteps and looked up, steam poured out of the bathroom.

Daniel had found a hairdryer and had plugged it in their room. He was drying his hair.

Daniel motioned towards the bathroom with an "It's free," hand motion.

Johnny took off his headphones and headed into the bathroom to finish getting ready.

They walked together into the kitchen, coats under their arms and boots on their feet.

Dutch was grumbling to himself about vacations and sleeping in, Jimmy looked wide awake and Tommy had fallen asleep again on the couch.

"Bobby's on his way," Jimmy said. "He grabbed the wrong jacket."

Sure enough, the door at the other end of the hall opened and Bobby came running, shoving his arms into his puffy jacket.

Daniel was putting his on, slipping his arms through.

Now that Johnny knew he was nervous he noticed that Daniel stood a little behind him.

It was strange to realize Daniel was scared.

He'd never thought of Daniel as scared in all of their fights.

Daniel always popped right back up again, fists and feet flying.

He'd thought Daniel was a little bit annoying but brave. But he also knew you could be brave and only handle so much. That some things just chipped away at you.

"Sorry to make you wait," Bobby said.

Dutch slammed his hand down on Tommy's chest and he woke up with a yelp. Dutch grinned, looking a little more awake, pleased.

"Time to go buttercup. Breakfast and coffee await."

They piled into the van, Jimmy locking up after them. He always locked up the lodge. He didn't always do so with the mansion, but he said one time when he was little they left it unlocked and a bear roamed in. He refused to ever make that mistake again.

Johnny let Daniel go first into the van, hand going out to stop Bobby, giving him a pointed look. Bobby just waited with a frown shivering.

Johnny followed, then Bobby.

Daniel sat in the middle of the backseat again, despite there being no empty cooler taking up space.

Johnny took the seat he'd been in. With their puffy jackets, it felt a little claustrophobic.

Daniel was putting on gloves and working on a scarf. He kept pulling more things out of his pockets.

His jacket was bright orange, he'd be so easy to spot, so hard to lose track of.

He wondered if that was the point. Daniel liked weird clothing. He'd chalked it up to New Jersey fashion.

"If there wasn't food promised," Dutch was saying from the front. "I would not be up right now. So you better all be grateful."

The resort wasn't a long drive.

Dutch flashed a season pass at the gate and a smile that seemed predatorial rather than charming at the guard.

Dutch didn't do charming, he wasn't good at it. He always came off too wild. Got him into trouble in lots of places. But the guard was tired and didn't care and waved them through.

The resort was busy on the inside, mostly with elderly people out to enjoy the snow for the weekend. Only Jimmy and the elderly wanted to make sure they got an early start on the day and he knew Dutch

was itching to complain, but they didn't have breakfast at the lodge. Just dinners.

It was this or breaking into the cupcakes Bobby brought.

They'd already done that once and ended up sick from eating nothing but sugar. The lesson was learned. No one wanted to repeat it.

They grabbed a table by the windows so they could see part of the slopes and took off their jackets to throw around the back of chairs. Claiming it as theirs, before some other group took it. Not that there was another group interested from the looks of it.

"Just grab a plate, fill it up and come back here. It's a buffet, so go up as much as you want," Jimmy said, mostly for Daniel.

They came here every year, usually several times a year.

Daniel nodded beside him and peeled off from Johnny's side.

Johnny watched him grab a plate. There was an elderly woman next to him and they started talking immediately.

He shook his head, but felt a bit of relief, Daniel was okay, he was still Daniel.

"So?" Bobby asked arms crossed beside him.

"So?" Johnny asked.

"Tommy said Daniel's conversation with his mom last night was a little weird. Like he kept apologizing and telling her he was okay? And then you had him go in the van first? What's the deal?"

Johnny ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "His mom's a little on edge okay? I mean yours would be too right?"

Bobby stared at him blankly. His brain usually required a little coffee to get going these days.

"Last semester," Johnny said softly.

Something clicked and Bobby's frown deepened. "She thinks we're going to hurt him? Like what this is an elaborate trap? Johnny we're not, like collectively, smart enough to pull something like that off."

Johnny didn't know whether to laugh or be offended. "We were

assholes."

"So he's not sticking to your side like glue because-"

"No."

"Damnit. I thought things were going so well, but we keep forgetting. **I** keep forgetting. How could I forget about his knee man? What the hell is wrong with me? I did it. I-"

"Bobby," Johnny said. "Drink some coffee. You all go skiing or something today and I'll see what Daniel wants to do. Don't make it a big deal, okay?"

Bobby sighed and nodded wandering over to the coffee machine grabbing a mug.

Daniel and the lady were still talking. Daniel had a big smile on his face, more alive than he'd seen their entire trip so far, except when he was telling his practical joke.

Johnny sighed and grabbed a tray.

Maybe Daniel would just want to hang out with old people. It seemed his M.O. People over 50 seemed to really like him. He wondered if it was because they lived longer and just had more patience. Liked his boundless energy.

He grabbed eggs and bacon, some crepe a guy made for him with fruit and cream in it, and made himself a coffee.

Their table was filling up and Daniel was still hanging around with the grandma, holding his tray and chatting excitedly. He wondered if Daniel was waiting for Johnny, intimidated to return to the table alone.

Or maybe he'd ditch Johnny and go sit with the old folks.

"Morning ma'am," Johnny said plastering a charming smile on his face and nodding to her.

"Johnny!" Daniel said looking back at him, that smile, utterly too bright for so early in the morning directed to him like someone with their brights on the road at 1am. "Muriel was telling me about this spot by a lake."

"Absolutely lovely dear," Muriel said. "They do snow sculptures."

Snow sculptures? Did she mean snowmen? What was so exciting about snowmen? They could make one themselves.

"Oh cool!" Johnny said, hoping it didn't come off sarcastically.

"Muriel used to make some when she was younger, made this gigantic recreation of the Taj Mahal and it took what?"

"Three days, can't anymore with my arthritis," Muriel said. "Not anything that big anymore anyway."

"Wow," Johnny said because three days to make a snow version of the Taj Mahal seemed like such a waste of time but Daniel was clearly into it and this woman clearly worked hard. It'd be rude to say it. "We'll have to check it out, thank you."

She smiled. "Have a great day dears. Enjoy your breakfast and welcome to Mountain High Daniel."

As she walked off Johnny turned to Daniel.

"Do you want to check out the sculptures today?"

It sounded boring, but it'd give them something to do other than sit by the fire drinking hot chocolate all day while the guys were out on the slopes.

"Seriously?" Daniel asked, his eyes were practically sparkling.

Johnny felt his heart try to rise up to his throat to escape.

"Sure, why not?" Johnny said with a shrug heading towards the table. "I'll check out some fancy snowmen with you."

Daniel looked delighted by this and was still practically beaming when they got to their table, though he noticed it went down several notches the closer they got.

The guys were talking about the slopes, which ones they were taking, arguing about which ones were better. Their goals and plans.

Johnny had been looking forward to it, the adrenaline, the rush of boarding down the mountain, how he always managed to beat Bobby even though Bobby set off earlier, the joy of at least once coming to a stop sending a wave of powdery snow on his friends and their cries of complaint. They'd get him back eventually. Being alone in the cold, rushing past trees, and the feeling of almost flying during jumps.

But Daniel wanted to see snowmen and Daniel couldn't enjoy the slopes and he wouldn't dare leave Daniel by himself.

One he didn't want to.

Two Daniel was likely to get in trouble.

Three the guys would have his head, his mother would be furious, and he'd disappoint Mrs. LaRusso.

So snowmen it was.

He listened to the guys chat while he ate. Daniel was quiet at his side. Johnny had to keep checking to make sure he was there. He was. But he wasn't as touchy and Johnny realized that that made him worried. A combination of silence and not touching was so utterly uncharacteristic from the Daniel he'd gotten to know. There was no hand on his knee, no arm brushing his, no thigh pressed into his, no shoulder bumping against him.

He looked tired, which didn't make any sense.

Daniel had slept. Johnny *knew* Daniel had been asleep. But it was like he was curling in on himself, which Daniel hadn't even done when they were fighting him and tormenting him. He always snapped back.

Johnny wondered if he should reach out, but he worried Daniel would push him off and how much that would sting.

Daniel had cleared his plate.

He was fiddling with the hem of his sweater and Johnny picked up his coffee to drink, puzzling over everything, trying to figure out what was wrong.

Daniel didn't hold things in, he always said what he was feeling, he was *always* talking, always saying how he was feeling.

His eyes met Tommy's across the table and Tommy had a look of amusement on his face and Johnny wanted to demand what was so damn entertaining.

With breakfast finished he downed the rest of the coffee in one go and grabbed his jacket.

Jimmy was leading them to the reception desk and Tommy grabbed his elbow, pulling him from the group as Jimmy and the receptionist

got wristbands sorted so they could come back for lunch despite not being together, and explaining everything to Daniel.

"What?" Johnny hissed.

"Why are you so uptight right now?" Tommy asked, there was a demand in there, like Johnny was making a scene. He wasn't.

"Daniel's never this quiet, and he's acting weird okay. Why do you look so delighted huh?"

"Johnny, you're an idiot," Tommy said.

"You wanna go?" Johnny asked, bristling.

Tommy stepped aside and motioned to Daniel. "What do you see? Like actually look man."

Daniel was standing next to the reception desk with his orange jacket stuffed under one arm pushing his sleeve up so the receptionist could stick a colorful band around his wrist. The receptionist was explaining that he just had to show it when he came back for lunch and the hours for lunch.

He frowned looking at Tommy.

He didn't get it.

Tommy hit him.

Slapped the back of his head and then realizing his mistake quickly darted away, back into the crowd of their friends by the receptionist knowing Johnny wouldn't make a scene to get them kicked out.

But his days were numbered.

He was fucking lucky he was going on the slopes and he and Daniel were visiting snowman village or whatever.

Call Johnny an idiot to his face and then slap him upside the head was a punch at least.

Tommy was whispering something to Bobby and Bobby turned slightly to Johnny and gave him a look.

A *don't murder our friend* look.

You look like you're going to go berserk, calm the fuck down look.

"Johnny, get your wrist band," Jimmy called oblivious to the tension that was quickly filling the air.

Johnny walked over and thrust his hand out in front of the receptionist, not taking his eyes off of Tommy who was hiding behind Bobby.

"So," Jimmy said to the receptionist. "Put a drink credit on Daniel's wristband. You've got my card on file right?"

"We can do that of course, sir," the receptionist said putting the little brightly colored banded on Johnny's wrist and Johnny pulled his hand back.

"Daniel, since you won the game. You get whatever you want from the bar, any time okay? One freebie."

"Thank you," Daniel said.

Johnny's eyes flicked from Tommy to Daniel. Daniel was studying the wrist band, he had a brochure in his hand and a thoughtful look on his face.

When Johnny looked up to meet Tommy's eyes he saw the boy running. He was out the door and bolting towards the lifts, throwing his jacket on.

Johnny could see the brightly colored wrist band on the wrist of the arm he had in his jacket.

Everything in Johnny screamed to chase him down. He could overtake Tommy. Tommy wouldn't make it to the ski lift, he'd find himself in the snow on the receiving end of a knuckle sandwich.

Suddenly there was movement, suspicious movement closer, and he saw Dutch lean over to cover his mouth and whisper something in Daniel's ear. Daniel's eyes widened and Dutch grinned in response, giving him a little salute before sauntering off, opening the door, and calling out.

"Tommy, what the hell man? Thought we were all going together, you scared of something?"

Daniel walked up to Johnny, putting his jacket on, and held up the

brochure.

"Ready for the snow sculptures?"

Johnny glanced down at Daniel. "Yeah, of course," he said.

They'd live for now. But their days were numbered. He'd get Dutch to tell him what he whispered in Daniel's ear and he'd demand Tommy tell him why exactly he thought he was an idiot this morning and then he'd pummel them both into the dirt, so deep he wouldn't have to bother digging a grave.

That was what Kreese would've told him to do. And it was tempting. Really *really* tempting.

Daniel was flicking the brochure open and walking.

With more effort than he expected, Johnny pulled himself away and followed Daniel out a different set of doors.

The cold hit him like a slap to the face and he hurried to put his jacket on.

Daniel beelined straight to a little white shuttle bus and then turned to wait for Johnny.

Johnny picked up his pace, jogging the rest of the way over and Daniel ducked onto the bus.

He plopped into a seat near the front and Johnny felt the dilemma of where to sit. What if Daniel didn't want him to sit next to him? Would it be better to sit across the aisle, in front or behind him?

Daniel reached out, took Johnny's hand, and pulled him down into the seat next to him.

He didn't take his hand back.

Johnny could feel his ears burning.

He didn't know what to say or do.

Should he ask Daniel what was wrong? Say nothing? Take his hand back? What did Dutch say? What stupid thing did Johnny not notice? Why did Tommy call him an idiot?

After awhile a few other people got on the bus and the driver set off.

Daniel still didn't take his hand back. He was holding onto Johnny's like he was worried Johnny would wander off, like a child or something. Johnny felt like if he tried to take his hand back now Daniel wouldn't let him. That his gentle grip would tighten.

Daniel was looking out the window at the trees and snow as they passed, making their way down the road. Between the trees, Johnny could make out a big frozen lake and people milling around in the distance. Daniel gave his hand a squeeze.

He wasn't curling in on himself anymore and seemed excited again, like seeing the lake brought up a wealth of energy that breakfast had scared off.

Had it been breakfast? Had the food been bad?

Johnny thought it'd been decent. He liked the resort's food and their drinks.

The bus parked and Daniel let go of his hand.

Everyone piled off of the bus and Johnny got off, hopping into the snow with a satisfying crunch.

Daniel was going to like this.

There was a lot more snow than almost anywhere else.

He turned back as Daniel made his way off the bus, hat on his head, scarf bundled around his neck, gloves on his hands.

He was prepared. Ready for the cold.

Johnny wanted to push him into a snowdrift but instead shoved his hands in his pockets.

He thought Daniel would turtle if he did that, sink and be unable to get up.

Daniel would probably get pissed, angry that Johnny had pushed him and wouldn't talk to him anymore, but then would need Johnny's help getting out. He'd probably be bitter and slap away Johnny's hand.

Daniel stepped into the snow and his face lit up. He hooked his arm in Johnny's and pulled, towards the path towards the lake.

"You okay now?" Johnny asked.

Daniel glanced up at him, confusion on his face. "What do you mean?"

"At breakfast..." Johnny said. "You were quieter than normal, withdrawn...I thought..."

Daniel looked away from him, the cold was turning his nose pink and he quickly brought up his scarf to cover his face with his free hand. "I'm was fine. Just...thinking."

Johnny frowned, Daniel's body language hadn't seemed okay. But maybe that was what Tommy had called him an idiot about.

He'd overreacted.

Maybe he just didn't see Daniel lost in thought enough to be able to tell it apart from everything else. Saying that aloud would for sure piss Daniel off.

When they reached the grounds of the snow sculptures Johnny froze.

"Holy shit," Johnny said.

Daniel laughed beside him.

The sculptures were massive.

He'd been expecting some creative snowmen, but these were actual sculptures made out of snow, towering above them.

He'd seen sand sculptures on the beach before, there were festivals and contests a couple of times a year but he just hadn't thought this was what Muriel had meant.

Daniel tugged at him towards the first one which was a vast castle. Inside the castle was a woman, a princess, Johnny guessed and below was a knight holding a sword, his horse standing nearby, but the part that Johnny couldn't take his eyes off of was the gigantic menacing dragon, curling around the castle tower.

He couldn't believe it was made out of snow.

They moved along the path looking from sculpture to sculpture, of lions with their mouths open mid roar, of penguins playing hockey, fantasy creatures like mermaids singing on rocks, a Pegasus that looked about to fly off, a medusa with her hair full of snakes that were hissing, and then a pirate ship.

Each statue was massive and detailed and they moved slowly from one to the other.

Daniel spoke softly from his side, reading to him from the brochure about the art, the artists, how long each piece took, how much snow it took.

Johnny could only stare with amazement as they walked their way around the lake, taking each of them in, surprised by each new one.

Johnny spotted a small wooden shack with staff milling about.

He looked at Daniel, who was staring up at a snow sculpture of a couple dancing, and carefully unhooked his arm from Daniel's.

Daniel turned to him, the scarf made his expression difficult to read.

Johnny pointed with his thumb to the building.

"I'll be right back, okay? Don't move...please?" Johnny asked.

Daniel's eyes widened slightly but he nodded.

Johnny hurried over. He'd been to the resort multiple times over the years, before he was friends with Jimmy, Sid took them out, so he knew that throughout the resort there were little places like this that offered a variety of things. Always run by staff in neon excited to help and let guests borrow things.

He bought some postcards, pictures of the year's snow sculptures, borrowed a polaroid, and promised when he returned it to take them up on their offer of free hot chocolate.

He jogged back to Daniel, putting the postcards in his pocket.

Daniel had let the scarf fall from his face and was looking up at the sculpture of the couple dancing.

Johnny looked through the viewfinder and snapped the shot.

The sound drew Daniel's attention and he turned startled as Johnny caught the picture as the camera spit it out.

He smiled and Daniel looked at him then turned abruptly to walk towards a woman heading towards them down the path.

They talked and Johnny frowned.

She was pretty he guessed and if he wanted a picture with a pretty lady to make Ali jealous or something he could oblige, even if he didn't like it.

But Daniel came back and took off his gloves and his hand wrapped around Johnny's wrist and pulled him over in front of the statue.

Brown eyes studied Johnny's face closely, then Daniel reached up and smoothed some of Johnny's hair.

Satisfied after another look over, Daniel pried the camera from Johnny's fingers and handed it over to the woman. Daniel stood by his side, seemed unsure for a moment, and then Johnny felt Daniel's arm wrap around him, reaching for his hip.

Johnny glanced at him. Daniel was looking ahead, smiling at the woman and the camera.

Johnny turned back to her as she started counting down.

He tried to smile but it felt weird, he could fall on the charming smile he wore so easily but it felt wrong. He had a different option if he hurried and he put his hand gently on Daniel's shoulder, thinking once again that the snowdrifts were perfect for just throwing Daniel in and he smirked at the thought of the indignation Daniel would have, but that he wouldn't lose track of Daniel with his bright orange jacket.

Maybe one day they could come back, and he could do it when Daniel's knee was feeling better.

Her finger pressed the button and the machine whirred. She rushed forward.

Johnny took his hand from Daniel's shoulder and held his hands out to receive both the machine and the polaroid's while Daniel thanked her. Johnny waited for Daniel to let go of his hip, to pull away, but he didn't. He stayed glued to Johnny's side long after the woman walked away, and while they waited for the photo to develop. The only difference was that Daniel's hand had moved, that his fingers had slid under his jacket and found a bit of bare skin. He was pressing his cold fingers firmly into Johnny's hip.

Johnny swallowed.

He was probably just cold.

Daniel was touchy, he reminded himself. It was who he was.

Conscious or unconscious, it just happened automatically without any thought to it.

The picture developed.

Daniel took it gently in his fingers and studied it closely before smiling. He slipping it into his pocket and zipped it before slipping his gloves back on.

"Do you want some hot chocolate?" Johnny asked.

Chapter End Notes

> Mountain High is an actual resort in California nearish Reseda/ the Enchino Hills in LA. But everything about it and the area is fiction because I haven't been.
> Though I have gone to look at snow sculptures before but not there, and am always amazed.

Rivals, past tense

The hot chocolate was wonderfully warm in Daniel's gloved hands.

He held it carefully, thanking the staff again for the use of their camera and the hot chocolate. They laughed and told him it was all complimentary because of the band on his wrist.

He was pleased. It felt like a date, *four more.*

He pulled his scarf up closer around his face again, chastising himself.

He was supposed to be building a solid foundation before thinking of what Johnny told him, what he'd said at the party. But it kept coming back, surfacing like a whispered promise. That Johnny hadn't explicitly told him no, that there wasn't a chance.

He kept taking things off the table and then changing his mind and putting them back. He thought he had to clear the table to make everything organized and focus on things one at a time, to tell himself he'd get to everything eventually.

But then he'd do something like wake up all over Johnny to the sound of the alarm clock and curse the alarm with every fiber of his being because Johnny felt nice and was warm and solid in his arms and he didn't want to let go.

Or at breakfast he struck up a conversation with Muriel and she complimented his sweater and he said it was his friends and he was borrowing it and the fact he'd called Johnny his friend out loud had shocked him. The fact he'd said it so easily.

Tommy on the other side of the buffet had smiled at him when Daniel had panicked because he'd been caught.

He was borrowing Johnny's soft sweater and someone else knew.

The worse part was that they were alone now and Daniel kept wanting to touch Johnny.

He wanted to take his gloves off, let his hands get cold, and slip them under Johnny's shirt. He wanted to reach up and touch the back of his neck with cold fingers. He hadn't wanted to let go of him but they couldn't just stand around forever and Daniel didn't know what he would've said when Johnny's patience ran out.

They stopped to look at another statue, this one of a whale. Daniel took it in, then, like every other one let his eyes fall on Johnny.

He knew Johnny hadn't wanted to come. He was keeping his promise to his mother, to keep him safe and to look out for him. And even though Daniel didn't like it, hadn't liked the look on Johnny's face during breakfast while the ex-cobras talked about skiing and snowboarding. This was *their* thing and Daniel couldn't go, he was holding Johnny back, keeping him from hanging out, from doing all the things he'd had planned, but he didn't complain.

But the sound Johnny had made when they'd arrived, the awe in his voice when he cursed, the ways his eyes widened as he took everything in drew Daniel in like a moth to a flame.

He was suddenly so relieved they were alone, that he didn't have to share Johnny with anyone else.

He was so relieved that it was as cool as Muriel had explained, and a little smug about the fact he'd been right to pick it.

He was surprised at how long Johnny wanted to stay at each one, like he was at an art museum studying the brush strokes of a masterpiece.

Daniel got bored quickly, he liked them, each new one was amazing but he'd be ready to move on earlier than Johnny was.

So he figured out a system.

He'd realized elbows and below didn't make Johnny flinch, so hooking his arm through Johnny's or holding his hand was fine.

He stayed with his arm hooked through Johnny's and he'd look at the sculpture, would read from the brochure, and then would study Johnny. He would wait for the shift, for Johnny to change his stance, it was subtle but he took it as time to move on to the next one.

He had plenty to think about while they walked.

While he studied the sunlight that made Johnny's blonde hair looking brighter, made it look like gold, the way his blue eyes roamed the sculptures, the pink of his nose and cheeks.

Johnny was wearing a warmly lined dark brown leather jacket and jeans and boots but he didn't have a scarf, or a hat, or gloves. His hands were shoved into his pockets.

Daniel thought he must be freezing, but like always he didn't complain.

Daniel took a sip of his hot chocolate, he wanted it to last, the warmth and sweetness.

They were almost to the end, having walked the entire lake and Daniel could see the shuttle waiting to take them back to the lodge.

His knee didn't hurt, they were moving too slowly, so carefully from one to the other that it barely felt like he was moving and when they stopped Daniel put his weight on his other leg and leaned into Johnny.

He wondered what they'd do the rest of the day.

He knew they could eat lunch at the lodge, that he could drink at the bar, but he doubted the ex-cobras would get back until the evening.

He didn't want them to get back until the evening.

He didn't want to have to share Johnny again yet. But the thought of going back early, of figuring out how to get back to Jimmy's and having the whole place to themselves seemed too tempting for Daniel to misbehave.

He had a hard enough time keeping his hands to himself in public.

He finished off his hot chocolate and threw the cup out in the nearby trash can before they made their way back up to the bus.

Daniel let Johnny go in first, letting go of his arm.

He liked sitting near the front, but Johnny headed further back, paused halfway, and turned back to Daniel, a question on his lips like suddenly he wasn't sure if sitting in the back was a good idea.

"Sit where you want," Daniel said.

He didn't mind sitting in the back. But he liked being near the front. In case the driver was willing to talk.

Johnny grabbed a seat, sitting by the window and Daniel sat down next to him. No one else was sitting in the back, so Daniel put his hand on Johnny's leg, a little higher up his thigh than he usually put it.

He'd try to behave, but Johnny didn't seem to mind this so he'd push it, just a little bit.

If this was fine, then he'd try it again when they were off the mountain, when Johnny was back in shorts so he could touch his skin.

As expected Johnny didn't say anything and Daniel frowned into his scarf.

He wondered if it was because of the ex-cobras, to have a group of friends so close that they shared a bed with Johnny, maybe they touched him like this sometimes. Jealousy pricked at his skin. He took a breath.

"What do you want to do now?" Daniel asked.

Johnny lifted his arm and looked at his watch. "It's afternoon, are you hungry?" he asked.

"A little," Daniel said. "Is there a grocery store or something nearby?"

"We get a free lunch...did you not like breakfast?"

"No, breakfast was good but dinner is just marinated meat, right? That's not going to be enough. We could buy sides, vegetables, or something."

Johnny's laugh was practically a snort of amusement.

"Vegetables aren't *that* bad. There's a lot of options," he said. "mushrooms, asparagus, carrots, potatoes, brussels sprouts, broccoli."

"You definitely are hungry," Johnny said. "Hang in there LaRusso, almost back at the lodge, you're talking like a teen who likes vegetables."

Daniel frowned and gave Johnny's thigh a gentle but firm squeeze.

"*Daniel,"* he said trying for the same tone Mr. Miyagi had used to correct Johnny from calling him sir.

They were not going to backslide. Daniel liked hearing Johnny say his name. He was not going to let that change without a fight. He was looking at Johnny sternly and Johnny looked surprised but nodded.

"Sorry," Johnny said softly.

Daniel waited. There were some things he really liked hearing Johnny say. That he was sorry, that he'd do whatever Daniel wanted, please, and Daniel's name.

He knew Johnny had been teasing, but it felt like a slippery slope. Too easy for Johnny to fall back into his old ways, not that Daniel had seen him slip up yet. But they were spending time alone with the ex-cobras and Daniel was worried things would fall apart.

Johnny hadn't looked away yet, trying to figure out what Daniel wanted. Daniel could wait, he *would* wait.

Pink suddenly spread across his cheeks to his ears and Johnny looked away.

Daniel nearly reached out to grab his chin. This wasn't over, but then Johnny said his name so softly that Daniel barely heard it, but it sent a thrill down his spine.

Daniel grinned, pleased, and turned back in his seat.

He slid his hand up Johnny's leg to his knee and felt the boy next to him shiver.

Daniel paused and turned back to look at Johnny who was looking out the window. His hands were pink from the cold.

Daniel took both of Johnny's hands in his own. Sure enough, they were freezing. He lifted them up to his face and he breathed on them, rubbing his fingers over them, trying to get some warmth back into them.

"You really should be wearing gloves," Daniel said.

He sounded like his mother, no wonder Johnny had made fun of him over vegetables.

He pushed through. "And a hat. All your heat is going to escape. So what if you look cool? You won't look cool anymore if you get frostbite, or get sick."

It was the same tone his mother used when he refused to use his crutches. He was only 18 and he was already becoming his mother. He was doomed.

He focused on Johnny's hands, the calluses and scars. A long time of

hard work at karate.

There were a couple of new ones though, parts of his skin that were an angry red, scabbed.

Daniel furrowed his brows. "When did you get hurt? I thought you stopped karate. You stopped fighting."

"I.." Johnny always seemed to struggle to share things, like he had to climb a mountain to do so and most of the time just decided it wasn't worth the attempt.

Daniel didn't know how to make it easier, how to coax it out of him. Was it because it was Daniel? If he was one of the ex-cobras would it have been easier?

Daniel frowned and breathed on Johnny's fingertips again, they were starting to warm up. He glanced up at Johnny who was looking at him oddly. It was clearly Daniel then he thought with a frown.

The foundation Daniel was building wasn't as sturdy as he'd thought.

He had to work harder.

Maybe it was because he'd insinuated Johnny was being like a naughty kid, out fighting and doing karate despite telling Daniel he wasn't, even though Daniel knew Mr. Miyagi was planning to train him. He knew karate was in Johnny's future again and Daniel wasn't against it anymore.

He was learning to share Mr. Miyagi, he could do it.

"I didn't mean to seem accusatory," Daniel said. "Just curious."

Johnny took in a deep shaky breath and Daniel wondered if he'd hurt his feelings. He still couldn't tell. He ran his thumb over Johnny's knuckles.

"I.." Johnny was trying again. His voice was low, deeper.

He shifted in his seat, turning towards Daniel, and he pulled his hands out of Daniel's grip.

Daniel started to reach for him again but Johnny was looking down at his hands.

He pointed to a scratch along the side of his hand. He took a deep

breath, cleared his throat, and said, "Fixing a screen at South Seas apartment complex."

He turned his hand over, there was a thin cut between the webbing of his fingers between the index and middle finger.

"Girl at school pulled a paper out of my hand too quickly, it's a paper cut."

He pointed to one on the back of his thumb.

"Cut myself on the ladder, there was a nail loose, I fixed it."

He moved on to his other hand. There were aset of scratches. "One of your neighbor's cats got out when we went in to fix something. I caught it but it wasn't happy."

He continued moving his hands and pointing out new scratches.

"Dutch was screwing around when we were trying to help put a poster up. One of the beakers in science class broke and I tried to help clean up with my bare hands. Got chewed out for that one. Fucked up and sanded my hand rather than Mr. Miyagi's deck. One of the lights bulbs in the box of replacements was broken and I didn't realize until I shoved my hand in. Was biking with the guys and had to turn suddenly and landed in a bush. It had some thorns. Didn't realize we had thorny bushes around here. Tommy pulled them all out. But that's what those are."

Johnny had the worse luck. He didn't seem to be upset about any of it, just as if it was his lot in life.

The bus pulled to a stop in front of the resort and Johnny was looking at him, waiting.

He realized he had to get up and move. He hurried, grabbing onto the back of the seat in front of him and heading towards the door.

Every time Daniel got hurt Mr. Miyagi or his mother patched him up. He healed quickly under Mr. Miyagi's watchful eye and help. The worst damage Johnny and his friends caused dulled to mere aches once Mr. Miyagi went to work.

But Daniel couldn't get the image of Johnny not telling anyone, just patching himself up with a first aid kit in his bedroom.

Except, Johnny said Tommy pulled out the thorns.

Maybe he did get help. He stopped and turned.

Johnny was right on his heels and quickly jumping back and to the side, moving on the balls of his feet with grace so he didn't crash into Daniel. He caught a look of frustration, a spark of annoyance on Johnny's face. Daniel knew that face and he grinned.

"Why didn't you tell Mr. Miyagi when you got hurt?"

"It was never a big deal," Johnny said walking on, around Daniel and past him, hands shoved back into his pockets.

Daniel followed him into the resort. The rush of warm air as they walked through the doors was shocking. They found a small table in the dining room and Daniel carefully took off his hat, gloves, and scarf and put them in his pockets and put the jacket on the back of one of the chairs. Johnny just took his hands out of his pockets.

"Did you make it to the lake?"

Daniel turned, Muriel was standing with her jacket in her arms and a warm smile on her face. Daniel was delighted to see her again.

"We did, just got back," he said smiling.

Muriel's eyes went to Johnny.

"We're about to order lunch," Johnny said.

All fake charm in his smile.

Daniel wanted to roll his eyes.

"Have you eaten? Want to join us?" Daniel asked.

"Oh, that'd be lovely! I'd like to hear what you thought," Muriel said setting her jacket down on the back of a chair. "If it's not too much trouble, it looked like you were a part of a big group this morning."

"They're out on the slopes, so they probably won't be joining us," Daniel said pulling his chair out. He glanced around.

"We order for lunch," Johnny said tapping a menu in front of him.

"Oh," Daniel said and sat down picking up the menu.

"So, how do you all know each other?" Muriel asked flicking her menu open.

Johnny took the pitcher of water from the center of the table and poured her and Daniel a glass of water.

"Karate rivals," Daniel said. "or used to be. We go to school together in the Valley."

Muriel laughed and Daniel looked up at her.

"Sorry," she said. "That's just how my husband answers that question too. But he says *archery rivals*."

"Archery?" Johnny asked, interest finally piqued, leaning forward.

He wasn't touching his menu. Probably already knew what he wanted.

Daniel quickly glanced at his menu.

The waiter was walking over.

He flipped the page.

The waiter stopped at their table and he caught Johnny motioning to Muriel first. Muriel ordered and Daniel scrambled waving for Johnny to order before him.

"And you sir?"

"Fish and chips," Daniel said.

"To drink?"

"Iced tea."

The man nodded, collected their menus, and left.

Daniel sighed and turned his attention back to Muriel.

"So archery?"

"When I was younger I practiced archery, competed in it actually. And this guy was being annoying all the time, and it really got under my skin. Before the end of the day of the competition, I accidentally shot him in the shoulder. In the moment it was horrifying. There was all this blood and we had to snap off the end before he was put in an

ambulance. I thought I killed him. I panicked. I stole my Dad's truck and drove to the hospital to see him. He was fine.

"They patched him up, but he milked it. Complained like I really messed up his shoulder. Every day after school I was there helping him with homework, helping him eat. I felt so bad. When he was released I went to his house. His sister told me he was fine, that he was pretending it was worse than it was. I chewed him out. Stopped talking to him. But he found me again, like ten years later, and apologized and asked me out dancing. I was so mad at him, but I agreed. We ended up having a great time.

"But every time we met anyone and they asked how we met he'd say "Archery rivals" and then he'd have a long pause and say "or used to be. She shot me in the shoulder." Now, after 40 years he's finally learned to tack on "And now we're married." So tell me about your karate rivalry."

"I nearly broke his knee," Johnny said quietly. "Which is why we're not on the slopes with the others."

"I kicked him in the face," Daniel said with a grin. "I won."

"How does a kick to the face not beat out a kick to the knee?" Muriel asked with a frown. "Couldn't you have damaged something worse?"

Daniel frowned, he hadn't really thought of that.

"You can kill someone," Johnny said softly fingers trailing through the condensation on his glass. "But it wasn't like that. I'm fine."

"Sounds like karate is pretty dangerous," Muriel said.

"Can be," Johnny agreed. "But it's also where I made friends for the first time. So I...even though I don't do it anymore, it still means a lot to me."

Daniel blinked, Johnny was popular. He always had people around him. The thought that before Cobra Kai Johnny hadn't any friends sounded unbelievable.

"You quit?" Muriel asked gently.

"Kind of had to," Johnny said. "My dojo...sensei...wouldn't have let me come back after I lost. And I didn't want to, I realized they hadn't different values than I did."

"That's ridiculous," Muriel said turning to Daniel. "And you? Still doing karate?"

"Uh yeah," Daniel said. It **looked** bad from the outside, without the context. *He* looked bad. He swallowed. He wasn't going to explain that Johnny had tormented him all through the year. "It's all complex. But I'm being taught a different style than Johnny was being taught. Our sensei's have different approaches. Mine...he...doesn't believe in fighting. It's for defense only. So it's more for meditation and defense. Balance," Daniel said.

He worried his lip with his teeth looking at Johnny. Johnny hadn't had friends. He thought those four were it.

Daniel had had tons of friends he left behind in Newark. People he could hang out with after school, this year had been his first time without friends and he'd still had had Ali.

Johnny seemed uneasy like he'd said too much, and regretted it.

The waiter came back with their drinks and food and Daniel was so relieved to see him.

Mentally thanked him for saving him as his food was set in front of him.

"Which were your favorite sculptures?" Muriel asked.

Daniel thought about it while he ate. He'd liked a lot of them.

"The dancing couple," he said.

"That's a good one," Muriel said.

Daniel looked at Johnny. Johnny had turned in his seat and was fiddling with his jacket. He pulled out a packet and Muriel leaned forward a smile dawning on her face.

"You bought them!" she said.

"Uh, yeah," Johnny said awkwardly opening a packet and flipping through it. He pulled out a postcard. "This one."

Daniel looked at the postcard. It was a glossy photo of the first one. The fairytale piece. That was the one that clued Daniel in that Johnny was stunned by the sculptures. He'd gone to move on and Johnny hadn't budged. His lips were parted with his breath visible in the cold.

Looking up at it in awe like a child. It'd made Daniel's heart flutter and he remembered smiling.

He carefully passed the packet of postcards over to Muriel.

"Which one was your favorite?" he asked.

She flicked through them and pulled out the lion with its mouth open mid roar.

"I know the artist who did this one, so I gotta say this one," she said with a smile before passing them back to Johnny.

"I thought we could show the guys when they get back, and there's a special post office with fancy stamps. I thought you might want to send one to your Mom and Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said, putting them away and back into his jacket pocket.

"Well if you're not hitting the slopes what are you planning to do with the rest of your day?" Muriel asked.

"Johnny said we could grab a taxi to the store. One of the guys brought marinated steak for dinner, but I want to get stuff for the sides," Daniel said.

"I could take you," Muriel said. "My husband doesn't get here until tonight, so I'm just hanging around. I should buy stuff before he gets here anyway."

"Really?" Daniel asked.

"Sure, not a problem. Do you have any ideas on what you want to make?"

"It depends on what they've got available, but some potatoes and vegetables."

Muriel smiled. "We can go after lunch if that works with both of you."

Daniel turned to meet Johnny's gaze and he looked up from his sandwich and nodded.

"Perfect," Muriel said.

Daniel felt more at ease again.

He talked to Muriel about where she'd been and the things she liked in

the area. She wanted to know about New Jersey so he talked about the winters there, told her about skiing as a kid with his parents at some cheap place. They talked for long enough that the lunch crowd left.

They put on their jackets again when the waiter cleared their table and followed her to her small car. She talked more about her husband, how they came up every year, and Daniel thought it must be nice to have traditions like that.

Johnny sat in the back of her car quietly and he glanced back at him through the mirror.

Johnny had that kind of tradition, with his friends.

He'd probably had traditions with Ali.

Daniel hadn't really thought about starting traditions with Ali. He'd wanted to go on the slide with her, or swimming, but they always found themselves at the movies.

He wondered if that was a tradition, or if they had just been avoiding talking to each other. He wondered if sitting next to each other in the dark made it easier to pretend everything was okay.

He thought it must be nice, he wondered if he could start some. What did he want to start?

Muriel parked the car and Johnny climbed out and opened her door for her. She laughed and patted his hand. They walked into the store. It was small and empty of people.

Muriel grabbed a cart and Johnny grabbed a basket.

"I'll meet you up here," Muriel said motioning towards a bench on the other side of check out.

"Thank you," Johnny said.

Daniel followed Johnny through the aisles.

He studied his broad shoulders, his hips, the way he walked, basket on his arm.

Johnny who Daniel had spent a semester hating, wondering how no one saw what a monster he was.

But he was so damn polite, so easy to like.

Daniel had met Muriel first, but Johnny was charming her with almost zero effort.

He hadn't had any friends before karate. He hadn't even been doing karate his whole life.

Which meant child Johnny, preteen Johnny had been friendless.

Daniel frowned into his scarf, was it like when a girl grew up over the summer and everyone took notice? Did Johnny suddenly bulk up after a summer of karate and everyone was drawn in?

But he only counted those four ex-cobras as friends.

Johnny stepped to the side and turned and Daniel was glad he'd thrown the scarf around half his face again because he felt like he'd been caught staring at Johnny's ass. He panicked that Johnny had realized why he'd been quietly walking behind him.

"What do you want to get?" Johnny asked. "Your the one with the ideas."

Daniel felt his shoulders relax. He hadn't been caught. He walked forward. He had to focus.

"Where's the produce section?"

Johnny pointed in a direction and they walked there. Daniel trying to stay by his side, trying not to slow down. He kept catching himself slowing down because he wasn't done looking, *appreciating* he corrected. Was it so wrong to appreciate? Probably. Vegetables. Think about vegetables. They wandered through the aisles of produce, Johnny stepping aside and waiting.

Daniel stopped as well then remembered, this was his idea, his plan. Right.

"At the lodge, is there anything like oil and spices?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah," Johnny said. "Jimmy's parents have a bunch of that stuff in the cabinets."

Daniel nodded and hooked his fingers in the edge of the basket, to pull Johnny along with him. He dug through the potatoes, eyeing them and feeling them the way his mother trained him to. He picked

out tomatoes, gathered up asparagus, and noted Johnny's wrinkled nose at the asparagus. He clapped his hand to Johnny's chest twice.

"Trust me," he said with a grin before moving on grabbing a lemon and adding it to the basket.

He studied the cheese selection and grabbed a hunk of parmesan and put it in the basket. He didn't even check to see Johnny was beside him and he didn't realize until he dropped the cheese next to him that he just knew Johnny was there, just expected him to be there and trusted he would be.

That was new.

He moved on, grabbed butter, green onions, and shredded cheese. Then turned to look in the basket, checking over everything with the recipe in his head. He nodded and then grinned up at Johnny.

"Okay, we're good. As long as we've got oil, foil, and decent seasonings at the lodge."

Johnny nodded and headed off to the checkout. Daniel worked his way through his pockets trying to remember where his wallet was, which pocket. There were too many of them.

The worker was almost done with their stuff and Daniel pulled out his wallet but Johnny was already paying.

"I could've-"

"You brought Lasagna," Johnny said gathering up the bags and walking over to the bench, and sitting down.

Daniel remembered the guys teasing Johnny for not pitching in the day before.

"Right," Daniel said quietly, before sitting down next to him.

"If you want help..."

"Sure."

They fell into silence.

"What are you going to even make?"

Daniel grinned, turning to look at Johnny. He explained the baked

potatoes, the asparagus with tomatoes and cheese and Johnny listened, nodding thoughtfully as Daniel explained the progress. "It'll be good," Daniel promised.

"All done?" Muriel asked.

Johnny was up and Daniel's hand which had unconsciously been on Johnny's thigh again brushed up to his hip when Johnny had slid forward before standing up. The tips of Johnny's ears were red and Daniel felt his heart pounding.

Johnny offered to help carry Muriel's bags and she let him.

Daniel moved to grab their bags but before he could Johnny had picked them up in his other hand.

"Is all of that too heavy?" Muriel asked concerned.

"No ma'am," Johnny said with a shake of his head.

Muriel smiled. "Karate that good at building muscle? You both do karate? And Daniel won?"

"Different teachers," Johnny said.

"I'm stronger than I look," Daniel said.

She played music while she drove and asked Daniel about school, about his plans *after* school.

"I don't know. Ma wants me to go to college, but I'm still unsure."

"There's so much you can do, you've got time," Muriel said.

She sounded so sure.

It was comforting.

He glanced back at Johnny who was holding their groceries in his lap.

He was so still.

When they got back to the resort it was much later in the afternoon. She parked and they thanked her. Johnny holding their groceries and walking off through the parking lot. Daniel had to hurry to follow after him.

"Where are you going?" Daniel asked.

"I'm going to put this in Dutch's van. He's always got a cooler. And he leaves the keys in there," Johnny called over his shoulder. "I can meet you in the resort, you've still got a free drink on your wristband. I can meet you around the bar."

Daniel stopped.

A car honked at him and he hurried towards the resort.

It made sense he told himself, that Johnny didn't want him following him to the van.

It was better for his knee to not walk all the way through the parking lot again.

But it stung a little.

He turned and walked into the resort and towards the bar. There were comfortable chairs near a roaring fire and he sunk into it. He prodded at the stinging. He felt like he was being shaken off. Like Johnny had pushed him away. He wanted to stay next to Johnny, even if that meant walking with him to the van for no other reason than to just be near him.

There was a menu on the table between him and an empty chair and he picked it up. A free drink seemed nice.

He tried to remember what the drink Dutch said was good. He didn't have a clue which one to get.

He was sure Johnny knew.

He read the descriptions slowly, working his way through each of them before he started getting too hot in front of the fire.

He set the menu down, found another comfortable chair, and moved there shrugging out of his jacket, gloves, hat, and scarf.

He sunk into the chair and got a whiff of Johnny and looked around for the boy.

He didn't see him.

It was the sweater.

He lifted it to his nose.

It still smelled a little like Johnny's room.

It had captured his attention during breakfast, he'd not cared about much of anything else, distracted by how soft it was against his skin, how warm and cozy, and trying to figure out what it was made out of.

He wanted to keep it.

He didn't think Johnny would let him keep his sweater.

He doubted most friends let their friends keep their clothes.

He'd borrow it at least, say he'd get it cleaned.

But Daniel had a feeling if he got far enough to take the sweater back to Reseda he'd never let it out of his hands again. He hadn't wanted to return the shirt after he'd gotten his hands on it.

This was going to be harder. He'd gotten a chance to wear it. To feel how soft it was against his skin.

"Pick something?" Johnny asked sitting across from him in the other comfortable seat.

"Not yet," Daniel said startled and sitting up. "I was thinking of what Dutch said, a hot chocolate? What do you always get?"

Johnny looked at him with mischief glittering in his eyes. "The fanciest expensive cocktail they'll make."

Daniel laughed. "Is that why they hate that you win?"

"Yeah."

"What is it?" Daniel asked looking over the menu again, checking the prices.

"A pink Cadillac. It's bright pink and they put gold in it and this fancy cotton candy on top to make it more expensive than it normally is. The guys fucking hate it. I get it to piss them off."

"Is it any good?"

Johnny shrugged. "It's got tequila in it and they don't hold back on it. So usually they have to catch my ass when I get up because no matter

how many years I've gotten it. It knocks my legs out from under me when I get up. They're supposed to put it in a cocktail glass but my first year I asked them for a pint of it. It's a monstrous concoction they made me. They found this stupid fancy glass that held a pint's worth but didn't look like a beer glass and made it for me. Stuck a little umbrella in it, some fresh fruit, a couple of cherries, and a damn twisty straw. Don't ever tell the guys this," he lowered his voice and leaned forward. "It's fucking awful. I've gotten used to it, but it knocks me on my ass on Sunday and I barely can function. It's just a stupid tradition. Get something that actually tastes good. You do not want the hangover that comes with it. Believe me."

Daniel felt his competitive spirit rise up but he doused it quickly with his memory of his hangover from attending the party.

"Do you know which one Dutch was talking about?"

Johnny moved closer, his knees touching Daniel's as he looked at the menu in his hands. He scanned the menu and then stabbed his finger down.

"That one. Peppermint dream."

"So now what do I do?"

"Show them your band and tell them your friend put a free drink on your tab," Johnny said sinking back into the seat, then glanced up at Daniel when he stood. "You want me to come with you?"

"No," Daniel said. *Yes.*

He walked to the bar feeling nervous, he hadn't ever ordered a drink before at a bar. Never had tried. His Ma always told him he looked young. His cousin teased him. There was no way they'd give him a drink with alcohol in it. They'd laugh in his face.

The bartender looked young and bored.

"Hi, my friend put a free drink for me on their tab? How do I use that?" Daniel asked.

"Band," she asked holding out her hand. Daniel held out his wrist and she flipped it over, looking at a number printed on the corner, and then picked up a piece of paper from behind her desk and looked between the two. "Yup, what do you want?" She asked opening a pen and holding it next to the number, waiting.

"A peppermint dream."

She nodded and scribbled it down. Daniel sat on one of the bar stools and watched her work. It took a couple of minutes, several ingredients but soon she placed a mug of hot chocolate down in front of him with fresh mint sticking out of whip cream drizzled in chocolate syrup and chocolate shavings. Sticking out of the corner was a candy cane.

"Thank you," Daniel said carefully taking the mug and slipping off the stool, and heading to the corner where Johnny was.

He took a sip.

He didn't taste any alcohol but he watched her add some. It was warm and tasted of chocolate and mint.

He set it carefully on the table and sat down across from Johnny.

"What do you think?" Johnny asked.

"I can't taste the alcohol."

"Those are the most dangerous."

"I like it," Daniel said picking it up and holding it as he curled up into the chair.

"Want to write to Mr. Miyagi and your Mom?" Johnny asked pulling out the packet of postcards and a pen.

"Sure," Daniel said leaning forward to set the drink back down after a sip and taking the items from Johnny.

He flicked through the postcards.

He picked one of a tree for Mr. Miyagi and one of the mermaids for his mother. He set the packet down on the other side of the table and flipped the two he picked over, scribbling down Mr. Miyagi's address and his home address before thinking about what to write.

He had so much to say.

It took a while and Johnny was silent the whole time.

When he looked up Johnny was gone and he felt a momentary panic, then saw him at the bar.

The woman working was talking to him and Daniel felt a surge of jealousy.

She was laughing.

Johnny looked at ease, not as awkward as Daniel had felt.

He sunk back in his seat, postcards finished. He held his mug in his hands and drank.

He wondered if this was how Johnny felt every time he saw Daniel and Ali together.

To see someone you like with someone else, even if it might be nothing. He didn't like the feeling. He didn't want to see the girls at school hanging around him, or him leaning casually against the bar chatting up the lady behind it with that charming fake smile of his. He wanted Johnny to look at Daniel, to just keep looking at him. It probably wasn't healthy.

He sighed and ran his tongue through the whipped cream that hadn't fully melted yet. Johnny probably didn't even like him much.

Daniel thought they were becoming friends, but they'd hurt each other so much.

Johnny walked back a piece of paper in his hands and Daniel wants to roll his eyes. Of course, he'd gotten her number.

"Here," Johnny said.

Daniel looked up at him.

He was holding out the piece of paper. Daniel blushed, mortified.

He did not need Johnny of all people getting women's numbers for him.

He just broke up with Ali, he didn't need or want someone else's number... Johnny's number perhaps.

He carefully reached out and took the paper.

"Thanks?"

"You said you liked it," Johnny said.

Daniel opened the piece of paper.

It was a recipe, the recipe for the drink he was holding.

His heart skipped a beat.

Everything washed away and he looked at Johnny and then down at the paper.

Maybe Ali didn't want Johnny but Daniel did. He really *really* did.

He just had to figure out how to get things moving, how to not scare him off, how to get him to let Daniel in.

With a friend like this...

"If I ask you questions, will you answer them?" Daniel asked.

Johnny looked at him surprised. "It depends, but I guess. I'll try."

Daniel nodded then looked thoughtfully. "You can ask me questions, to make it fair."

"Okay."

Daniel looked into his drink like he was expecting a question to bubble up. His dark hair falling and casting shadows on his face.

He looked up.

"Did you really not have any friends before you started Cobra Kai?"

Oh.

This wasn't going to be easy.

This wasn't going to be fun.

He'd let his guard down around Muriel and let Daniel see some of his past, some of his wounds.

Never let the enemy see your weaknesses.

"I didn't. Let me guess, you were super popular in Newark?"

Daniel laughed. "I had friends, but it was easier because I had my cousin with me. Not popular though. I'd say you're pretty popular. You were surrounded by girls the last couple of days."

It wasn't a question but Johnny didn't know what to say. He didn't know how Daniel would take him apologizing to Ali.

Hell Bobby hadn't taken it well.

Daniel looked down at his drink again then up at Johnny. His eyes were dark, glittering in the firelight.

"Are we friends?" he asked softly.

Johnny didn't know how to answer that. He wanted to be more.

"Do you want to be friends?" His voice was practically a whisper.

Friends were better than enemies. Friends were better than wishing Johnny would disappear. Friends were *something* rather than an absence.

Daniel pushed the table to the side and pulled his chair closer to Johnny. There was no escape. Like being on the bus again, like being between Daniel and Mr. Miyagi, like waking up trapped in Daniel's grip in his sleep.

Maybe, despite no matter how much Kreese made Johnny think he was a predator, big, strong, smart, and fast, he was still just prey.

His heart pounded in his chest as Daniel's legs slid between his like it didn't mean anything, his hand coming to one of Johnny's knees because that was what Daniel did.

"I don't want us to be rivals anymore, enemies, whatever," Daniel said. "We're not strangers. I think that leaves the only direction we can go..."

"Friends," Johnny said softly.

Daniel tilted his head thoughtfully and nodded. He picked up his drink and took a sip. He had whipped cream on his nose.

"You got, uh..." Johnny said.

He motioned and Daniel just stared at him.

Cute.

Johnny remembered Daniel just usually cleaned people up around him at lunch.

He hooked his finger and dragged it down Daniel's nose, scooping up the whipped cream. He glanced over at the table Daniel had pushed aside. There were always napkins with the drinks, though Johnny never fully understood why.

For a drink like this yeah, but a glass of wine? Champagne? Anything without foam or whipped cream seemed like a waste.

He found the napkin and leaned over to grab it when he felt a warm hand grab his wrist and something warm and wet envelope his finger.

He looked back at Daniel who had Johnny's finger in his mouth and was licking it clean.

He pulled away with a wet pop and Johnny flushed bright red.

He didn't know what to do.

Was this how Daniel interacted with friends?

Was this what it meant to be friends with Daniel?

He was going to die.

Daniel was going to kill him.

He was going to look at the officers and say something like *I don't know what happened sir, he was fine like five seconds ago*.

And they'd have nothing to convict him on but it'd be all Daniel's fault.

He couldn't escape.

He couldn't get away.

His finger was wet.

He wanted to kiss Daniel.

How much alcohol was in that hot chocolate?

Daniel shifted in his chair, leaning back. He looked relaxed all of a sudden, at ease. He lifted his legs and brought them back down gently on top of Johnny's.

Johnny took the napkin, drying off his hand and sat back, adjusting to better balance the weight.

"Regretting it?" Daniel asked, amused.

"What?"

"Agreeing to be friends?"

"Do your worst."

Maybe he shouldn't bait him.

But he needed to seem like he could handle it. He wasn't sure if he could.

There was no turning back. He didn't want to.

Daniel grinned. "Okay then. Was Ali your first kiss?"

"No. Yours?"

"No. Girl from camp. Who was yours?"

"I don't kiss and tell. Skip."

Daniel frowned at this but Johnny wasn't going to tell him about the lifeguard. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

"Why do the staff say what they say? Why can't anyone ask for you?"

"Sid thinks I'm too full of myself and says my ego needs to be taken down a notch. I'm to be neither seen nor heard unless he's got something that requires a "family"."

Daniel's eyes had held a challenge, a challenge to keep meeting them, to stare at one another while they bared their souls, but Johnny had looked away at that question.

He said it casually.

No one asked, he didn't want them to ask.

There were a lot of things the guys didn't ask and he was realizing Daniel might.

Only his mom knew about the lifeguard and Johnny's summer beach fling.

But everyone he cared about knew about Daniel.

He realized it was his turn. He needed to flip things onto something lighter.

"What did Dutch whisper to you?"

Johnny caught the hard look in Daniel's eyes, the spark of a fight brewing, the way his hands were in fists against his chair.

But it cleared like blown away clear by a gust of wind.

"Told me that sometimes in big open spaces or crowds you get lost so it's better to keep a good hold on you because you disappear easily. He told me not to worry about you getting punchy, you won't start a fight in public," Daniel said.

Johnny wondered if that was why Daniel had held his hand, why he'd hung onto his arm.

Dutch would be pleased.

Dutch was also going to get hit.

He'd made Daniel think he was one of those toddlers that wore a leash backpack.

"What were you like pre-cobra kai?"

Johnny frowned.

"I went to a bunch of different schools. I moved around a lot. Without moving around a lot. I..."

Before Cobra Kai Johnny had several parts.

There was with his mom in the first apartment, the one they moved to when she lost her job, the one she had when she was working three jobs and still couldn't afford it, when they were living in the car, and then Sid.

And time living in Encino hills was broken up by different schools too.

His mother could only handle so much of the nice prep schools Sid tried to stick Johnny in only for Johnny to come home bloody day in and day out before Sid relented to his mother's tears and moved him to a different fancy prep school.

"There's a lot," he said.

"Ali said you all didn't go to school together before high school," Daniel said.

"Didn't. I went to fancy prep schools and private schools."

Daniel was quiet, then spoke softly.

"You make that sound bad."

Johnny glanced at him then looked away.

"It was."

His turn.

Daniel was an open book. He didn't have a lot to really ask. Not that he was willing to ask.

"Do you still hate California?"

Daniel was looking at his hands, they were fists again and he looked up.

"No. I miss things, but Mr. Miyagi..."

"Makes it worth it?"

"Yeah."

"Even after all of the shit we did?"

"Yeah."

"WELL LOOK WHAT WE HAVE HERE!"

Dutch slung his arms over the back of Daniel's chair and the other guys threw their jackets over the backs of other chairs and sunk in with a look of exhaustion but happiness.

Dutch was leaning over looking at the table they'd pushed aside and he was too close into Daniel's space and his fingers were still curled tight into fists and Johnny wondered if Daniel would hit him.

He kind of wanted to see it.

He'd expected Daniel to move his feet off of Johnny's lap but he didn't.

He didn't look like he wanted to move.

He looked annoyed, that flicker of anger still there, flaring.

"Oh hell yeah LaRusso! How was it?" Dutch asked stepping back and turning to the other guys. "He got the drink I recommended." He sounded pleased. Like his ego had been boosted.

"Thank god," Jimmy said. "Not another one of those pink

monstrosities."

Johnny felt an urge to go up and order one, but the weight of Daniel's legs kept him still.

"It was good," Daniel said softly.

"How were the slopes?" Johnny asked.

"So good," Bobby said with a satisfied sigh.

"Shall we go?" Tommy asked and Johnny saw that he hadn't sat.

He was standing behind the others, ready to run if need be.

Johnny smirked.

He'd nearly forgotten.

He turned to Daniel.

"Your knee okay?" Johnny asked softly. "Need to have it propped up longer?"

Daniel had been looking at his hands and then seemed startled by hearing Johnny ask. He quickly looked up again.

"Huh? Oh, no, it's fine."

Daniel lifted his legs up and swung them over and to the ground before standing up and Johnny got up quickly prepared to catch him if he swayed.

But Daniel was fine.

He wasn't like Johnny.

He didn't hit the floor every time he was in this room and stood up after his drink.

Johnny gathered their things and started to follow, but then remembered what Daniel said and walked beside him out of the resort and to the van.

Daniel pushed the door open and then waited for Johnny to go through first, motioning with his arm, before ducking after him.

Daniel sat next to him again even though there was space.

The warmth was nice.

He listened to the other guys get in the van with curses over the cold and Johnny slipped forward a little after Tommy sat down and he flicked his ear.

Tommy nearly jumped out of his seat and Johnny sank back in his seat amused.

Bobby turned and pointed him with a glare and Johnny shrugged.

The ride was full of the guys talking about their day, the times they wiped out, the fun they had.

When they got out at the lodge Daniel beelined straight to the trunk, grabbing the groceries.

"I can get those," Johnny said.

"You can help carry this..." Daniel said looking at the bags.

Johnny held out his hand.

Daniel put his hand in Johnny's, looking at him with a big mischievous grin.

Johnny looked down at their hands.

It was a bad joke.

It was a nice result.

He liked holding Daniel's hand and he'd laced their fingers together so he couldn't let go.

But the urge to pick Daniel up and dump him in a snowdrift in response to the joke was rising by the second.

The guys had all run for the warmth of the lodge, so instead, he closed the trunk and latched it with his free hand, and walked towards the lodge.

"You've been up all day, are you sure you're okay?" Johnny asked softly.

"I've been leaning against you all day," Daniel said. "Leaving almost no pressure on my other leg. I'm sure it's fine."

"We'll go to a thermal pool tomorrow. The guys will be black and blue."

"I didn't bring-"

"They have bathing suits for rent for free for members, which we are."

They opened the door and Johnny expected Daniel to pull away and let go but he didn't, beelining straight for the kitchen and pulling Johnny along.

The guys were grinning at him and he glared them down.

Daniel only let go of his hand once Johnny was firmly in the kitchen, setting down their groceries and going through the cabinets.

He pulled things out, then paused.

"Wash your hands," he told Johnny and went back to looking around.

Johnny didn't need to be ordered twice.

He was trained to act on the first command.

He washed his hands and waited for what Daniel wanted him to do.

"Rinse then dry all of the produce."

"Slice these."

"Grate this."

Daniel moved about the kitchen like he knew what he was doing and Johnny struggled to do what he was told. The tomatoes he sliced just sort of turned to mush under his hands.

"Like this," Daniel said and returned to his side, swapped out his knife to a serrated one, turning the tomato and making a quick slice.

"Never grated? Okay."

Daniel held the cheese and showed him what to do, hands over Johnny's.

"Careful you don't grate your fingers," he said softly in Johnny's ear before dropping from tiptoe at his side to go back to whatever he was doing.

It took a while and by the time Johnny was done the room smelled like dinner.

All the ingredients looked like real food.

It was impressive, especially when Daniel finished and started plating the steaks and everything else.

He grabbed some plates, then motioned with his head for Johnny to grab a few.

Johnny hurried and followed Daniel to the table, setting the plates out at the places around the table. Johnny turned to grab the rest and when he turned Jimmy was there.

"Leave Tommy alone," Jimmy said softly. "I know you still haven't noticed. He was trying to point out that Daniel's wearing your sweater and seems to like it okay? You're just so damn blind sometimes. Don't start a fight."

Johnny frowned as Jimmy turned. He followed. He put the food down in front of the last two. Then took his seat next to Daniel who pressed his leg against his and he looked over.

It took a moment.

That really was his sweater.

He'd offered but he hadn't thought about it.

He remembered Daniel at breakfast, quiet, concerning the way he kept fiddling with his sweater.

His, Johnny's sweater.

No wonder Tommy had smacked him.

He blushed lightly and looked away.

It looked good on Daniel, a bit too big. But nicer than it looked on Johnny.

"Damn LaRusso, your mother teach you to cook?" Dutch asked.

"Yeah."

"Dinners at your house must be amazing," Tommy said.

"They're pretty good."

"Wait so Johnny bought this and helped make it? And the lodge didn't burn down?" Jimmy asked.

Daniel laughed and Johnny glared.

"I had to show him how to cut a tomato, but he did alright."

"It's delicious," Bobby said, his tone pointed, his gaze pointed.

Johnny chill.

It was delicious. And Johnny was proud.

He'd helped, maybe not much but he really only knew how to make simple stuff.

If he was on his own he didn't think he'd starve. But he couldn't make this.

He could make sandwiches, and salads, and stuff out of a can, or frozen, a couple of box mixes.

But this was a different level.

He wondered if Daniel would teach him, but he also remembered the way Daniel moved his hands, guiding him had sent goosebumps along his flesh.

It'd be torture.

Delicious, fun to learn, but he'd probably get distracted by the fact Daniel would push himself on tiptoes and press up against him to get a better view over his shoulder. Not touching his shoulder but pressed against his back.

After dinner, everything was cleared away and Bobby brought out their next dessert, it looked like brownies.

Dutch looked delighted.

Bobby had to let him down easy.

Uno was retrieved from one of the drawers by Jimmy.

He passed the deck to Tommy who shuffled the cards with the precision of someone who worked in a casino but with the flair of a Las Vegas magician.

He passed out the cards.

"We're thinking snowmobiles in the morning. We could rent them after breakfast and go for a ride through the trails, then head back for lunch and after like an hour or so then hit the thermal pools," Bobby said setting his card down.

"Sounds good," Daniel said studying his cards, ordering them in his hand, and looking back to watch the cards the others played.

It wasn't a long game.

Not nearly as long as Monopoly the day before.

Tommy won.

Then Dutch, and Daniel.

It was between Jimmy, Bobby, and Johnny for a long time.

Then Johnny barely made it out safe and sighed, leaning back with relief, surprised when he bumped into something other than his chair.

Something fleshy.

Daniel's arm was thrown over the back of his chair, watching the game with amusement on his face as the guys bickered.

Jimmy and Bobby were taunting each other, trash-talking.

Bobby wasn't going to back down.

He was quick to shout Uno, stopping Jimmy from getting out.

And Jimmy was quick to make sure Bobby was drowning in cards.

Daniel was laughing at their antics.

Johnny sat up, not leaning against Daniel's arm.

He couldn't handle it.

He didn't want to have to explain it.

If Daniel didn't move it might be okay.

But he'd *have* to move.

The brush of an arm against the back of his neck would freeze Johnny in place.

He knew it'd make him forget how to breathe.

He'd tested it accidentally when his mother had gone to give him a half hug, arm around his neck, and the next thing he realized he was out past the pool house and she was cupping his face in her hands, saying his name over and over again.

He'd panicked.

He'd run.

Bobby whittled his cards down to one and it was like watching a western movie where it was high noon and someone was going to lose.

Johnny pushed his chair back and went to the fridge, grabbing sodas and passing them out before sitting back down.

It went around and around and around until finally Bobby got his card down on the pile and said "Uno" before Jimmy could open his mouth.

Jimmy groaned head in his hands flicking his card onto the table in frustration.

Johnny stretched. "I'm going to shower and sleep." He yawned. "8 again?"

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "Pack tonight guys, so when we come back from the thermal springs we can just grab our shit and go."

"I wanna get all of you home so I can get home before 10," Dutch said.

"Got a hot date?" Bobby asked.

"We got school the next day. I'm running out of days I can skip if I wanna graduate, smartass," Dutch said. "I gotta save those, for you know, *other* emergencies."

Johnny got up, gave Tommy a nod so he'd stop panicking, and headed back to the room.

He flicked on the lights and grabbed his stuff out of his bag.

Daniel stepped in and shut the doors behind him.

"Want to jump in first?" Johnny asked motioning to the bathroom.

Daniel stared at him for a moment before nodding, grabbing his bag, and hurrying in.

Johnny emptied out the pockets of his jacket.

He held the polaroid of Daniel and smiled softly.

He thought about showing it to Daniel, about telling him to give it to his Mom.

But he wanted to keep it.

He stuck it in one of his books and reorganized his stuff.

Setting out his stuff for Sunday and for the night and packing away everything else, including his cassettes that he wasn't going to get around to.

He heard the soft click of the door and Daniel flopped onto the bed.

"You should prop your leg up," Johnny said.

He grabbed his stuff for the night and made his way to the bathroom.

He shut the door and stripped on his way to the shower.

The hot water on his skin was a delight after being out and about in the cold all day.

He was tired.

He wondered what Daniel would've asked if the guys hadn't come back.

What Daniel had been thinking, why he'd seemed so wound up.

Then he laughed, a short laugh.

It was Daniel.

Daniel had a short temper around Johnny.

Fiesty was what Dutch called him and he hated agreeing with Dutch but he was right.

He'd been surprised they hadn't actually fought in so long.

It'd take time, like Daniel said.

But they were friends now.

Or at least that was what Daniel wanted.

He finished his shower and getting ready for bed.

Daniel still had the light on when he came out, was sitting in bed like he was waiting.

"If we're cleaning up before we leave, packing, what time should I set the alarm? 7?" Daniel asked.

Johnny looked over at the clock, it was after midnight.

He sighed, "Yeah."

He pulled back the blankets and slid into his side of the bed.

He waited until Daniel finished setting the alarm before turning off the light.

He sunk into the pillows.

"I don't want to go back to school," Daniel said.

"Because of Ali?" Johnny asked.

Daniel laughed, there wasn't mirth in it.

"I thought it'd be fine, but I miss her. I thought...I just...I guess I just wish this was a longer weekend."

He understood the desire.

He'd been lucky he supposed.

Ali had dumped him over break.

"I..." Daniel rolled over looking at him and Johnny turned his head.

"will wash your sweater and return it."

"You can keep it if you want," Johnny said softly. "It looks better on you anyway. Plus you might have more chances to wear it if you visit family in Newark."

He hoped it didn't sound like because Daniel had borrowed it he didn't want it back.

That wasn't the reason.

It wasn't an excuse.

Daniel *did* look better.

But this was probably his last year coming up here.

The guys hadn't talked about it but they probably wouldn't be seeing a lot of each other after graduation, maybe after summer.

They'd split up, go separate ways and Johnny didn't think Sid would take them here again. He'd take his mother, maybe. But not Johnny.

The road was coming to a dead-end ahead of him, soon he'd have to pick a direction before he was pushed off the cliff.

"Thanks," Daniel said.

Johnny nodded. He didn't have anything else to say. He was too tired.

The thought of going home was like being tied to a boulder and someone shoving it off a ship and trying to scramble to hold off the inevitable.

He wonders what nightmare awaited him tonight.

"Good night," Johnny said. He shuts his eyes.

"Good night Johnny."

Finding Footing

Chapter Notes

> Zahra-art made fan art (I love it! Thank you!): (this is my reblog) https://desolateice.tumblr.com/post/658085631677857792/ive-been-reading-root-beer-floats-and-green-tea

Daniel stayed up late. He hadn't meant to, but he had more energy.

He watched Johnny fall asleep in the dark. The tension in his shoulders fading, the sound of his soft breath.

He determined to stay on his side of the bed.

Moving as far to his end of the bed as he possibly could when he felt sleep becoming inevitable.

When he woke up in the moments before the alarm went off he could feel Johnny's steady breathing against his chest, his arm was wrapped around his waist.

It wasn't like the room was that cold that Daniel sought Johnny out in his sleep for warmth, though if asked, if confronted, that would be his excuse.

His mother told him that as a kid when he had nightmares and would crawl into the bed between his parents they'd have to wake him up in the morning before they left for work because they couldn't pry him off.

His grip was too strong.

It's why they went through such in-depth night routines with him.

Every night was a story night, every night was soothing lavender that the lady down the block recommended, warm milk, lullabies, a thorough check for monsters.

It worked 90% of the time, the other 10% sent Daniel running into their bed. He didn't have a lot of nightmares, didn't get scared of the night too often. But he had always thought it was amusing. This child version of him that latched on.

It explained why he always felt bruised when sharing a bed with Louie

at his grandparent's house. Louie was a light sleeper and probably woke up and would kick Daniel away.

He thought he'd grown out of it.

Johnny was warm in his arms, solid but stiff.

Daniel carefully untangled himself from Johnny and looked at the clock. It was six-thirty.

He rolled back, Johnny was too stiff.

It wasn't like how he'd been when Daniel had seen him the day before when he woke up, or the night before.

Daniel sat up.

There was tension through his whole body.

Daniel wondered if he woke Johnny up if he'd get socked in the face.

It looked like it. Johnny looked ready to fight.

Daniel puzzled on what to do, then reached a hand up to Johnny's hair. He slid his fingers through the golden locks he'd touched the day before ever so briefly.

"It's okay Johnny," Daniel said softly. "Whatever it is, it's a dream."

His breathing wasn't as deep, wasn't as slow and steady. When Daniel had nightmares he woke up suddenly, sitting up with a gasp.

He tried to be as soothing as possible. "Just a dream, you can change it, or escape it. Or come back to me."

They were supposed to go to the thermal pools. It was starting to look like Johnny might need those more than Daniel.

His hair was as soft as Daniel had thought. Daniel shifted, moving back to where he'd been, curled up behind Johnny hugging him close. Maybe that would help? He found one of Johnny's hands and took it in his.

Maybe it'd better to try something else.

"Breathe Johnny, like Mr. Miyagi says. Find your breath."

Daniel shut his eyes and breathed in deeply, wondering if he pressed close and breathed deeply, if Johnny's body would recognize it and calm down.

Daniel could feel Johnny's pulse racing.

He kept breathing, the breath Mr. Miyagi taught him that was deep.

A deep breath in.

Holding it for a couple of seconds.

And then a deep breath out.

It took a while but Johnny relaxed in his arms, his breathing settled, the pulse slowed.

Daniel kept at it, breathing purposefully, still soothingly rubbing circles around Johnny's hand.

To say he was proud of himself was an understatement.

He'd tell Mr. Miyagi if he didn't want to explain that they were sharing a bed and how it was fine and not weird and how much Daniel wanted it to be a normal occurrence.

"Good Johnny, keep breathing. I got you," Daniel whispered.

The room was slowly filling with light and Daniel watched Johnny sleep, face relaxed and calm, Daniel had never noticed his eyelashes before.

They were so light in color, and usually, his attention was drawn to his eyes. He looked so peaceful, so beautiful and Daniel's heart ached.

Johnny kept so much in.

He fought Daniel, he terrorized him, but now...Daniel wanted to kiss him.

He remembered the drunken kiss. The way he'd lunged forward, the feeling of Johnny's tongue, wanting to taste, memorizing everything like he was about to be quizzed on it.

Rushed, unsure if he'd get another chance so he went for it.

He wanted to know what was tormenting Johnny. There seemed to be

a lot. A lot of things he didn't talk about. A lot of things that he had buried deep.

His hands were full and Daniel wanted to help take some of it away.

It was better than thinking about the previous semester, about Ali dating a college guy, how she claimed to love him but never said she loved Daniel.

How part of him was jealous even though he knew he didn't love Ali the same way.

The alarm went off and Johnny's eyes flicked open and he seemed to take stock of where he was. Daniel carefully took his hand back, rolling away and turning off the alarm.

It was better not to mention it. To not talk about it yet.

He stood and headed to the bathroom with his clothes.

He showered, got ready for the day.

He wanted to take Johnny home with him. Ask his mother if they could keep him. Wake up next to him every morning.

He grabbed the hairdryer and pushed the door open and stepped out. Johnny was sitting on the bed lost in thought. He was dressed, all packed, ready to go. He glanced up when Daniel opened the door. Daniel sunk down onto a chair in the corner and plugged in the hairdryer and blow-dried his hair.

In Newark, one of his classmates had come to school with wet hair. Their hair had frozen. One of the kids reached out to touch it, fascinated and a lock had broken off.

Daniel liked his hair. There was no way in hell he'd let that happen.

Johnny walked off to the bathroom. Daniel yawned.

He ran his fingers through his hair, making sure he'd gotten it all dry before turning off the hairdryer and setting it aside, unplugging it. He packed his bag, carefully running his fingers over the sweater Johnny said he could keep. He set it on top of the plastic bag that held his dad's sweater and zipped up his bag.

He looked around. Johnny had already made their bed. There wasn't much else to do. He grabbed his bag and headed out to the living

room.

He'd have to spend time with them alone eventually.

He had questions he wanted to ask them.

He felt confident. He'd managed to use his breathing techniques to get Johnny to sleep. He did that. He could handle some punks who weren't morning people that used to torment him.

He dropped his bag and sunk onto the couch. Jimmy was awake and staring into the fridge. Tommy was gathering up trash in a black plastic bag.

"Hey, LaRusso."

"Hey."

"Johnny up?"

"Yup."

The other two boys exchanged glances and walked over, sitting across from Daniel in a couple of chairs.

Daniel would start with something easy.

"Did you all seriously not go to school together before high school?"

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "Met at Cobra Kai. Transferred to the same high school. A public one."

"I was already going to the connected elementary and middle school. Everyone else transferred to my school," Tommy said.

"Which is why all the girls talk to him. I think I got a photo somewhere here from our first year of karate," Jimmy said standing up and walking over to a bookshelf.

"Seriously?" Tommy asked with a laugh.

"What? My parents like photos. They liked the gi's. Thought it was cool," Jimmy said studying the collection of photos before grabbing one in a frame and then blowing on it, dusting it off with his sleeve. He walked back and handed the photo to Daniel.

It was like every other sports team photo he'd ever seen. Everyone

crowded into two lines. Tallest in the back standing with their shoulders back and heads held high and with their arms behind their back the way Daniel had seen, the others on their knees in front. That waiting position, ready to jump to their feet on command. The belt colors were all different. The kids at the front were white and yellow and orange. The kids in the back were black and brown belts. Kreese stood stiffly next to them, no smile on his face. No smile on the students' faces. Just stiff and attentive. They were in their white gi's.

Daniel studied the faces, looking in the back for Johnny, expecting him there, but then his eyes trailed to a blonde in the front. A small blonde with bright blue eyes.

"Oh," Daniel said surprised. "He's so small."

Jimmy laughed, "Johnny? Yeah, he got a huge growth spurt that summer. Shot up like a fucking tree. He got a workout regimen from Kreese. He was constantly working out."

Tommy leaned over, finger touching the glass over the frame, pointing each of them out.

They were babies practically.

Kids.

Soft features, messy hair, not yet ready to show no mercy, the steely gaze the black belts and brown belts had hadn't filtered in through their eyes yet.

Still learning.

Jimmy sunk back into his seat with a sigh. "Ah man, those days were weird. It was fun, you know all being in this class and getting to know one another. Johnny always came to class with new bruises. I thought it was because he was training extra on his own or picking fights."

Tommy looked up but nodded. "But it was like fights always found him. He never told us who was fighting him. Kreese wanted us to show up. Something about if someone attacks one of us they attack all of us. But Johnny would say something like he fell down while training on that extra workout Kreese gave him. It was total bullshit."

"I always wondered how they caught him. He's always had long legs, he can move so damn fast."

"I thought it was Sid," Tommy whispered.

Jimmy looked at him. "Yeah, sometimes I think it was. But sometimes he'd get more when Sid was out of town. It definitely wasn't his mom. She's as sweet as honey."

"I think it's why he trained so hard. Was so desperate for Kreese's approval but also he was already at war and desperately needed help."

They heard footsteps and Jimmy jumped up taking the photo with him and returning it to the shelf.

Johnny set his bag gently down on the floor next to Daniel's and sunk down next to him on the couch.

"You okay?" Johnny asked.

"I am," Daniel said with a soft smile.

They waited in silence as Dutch wandered in then Bobby.

"So breakfast time," Dutch said with a yawn. "Alright, out. Let's go. Your poorly paid chauffer is up."

Dutch motioned for them to go.

Daniel scooped up his bag, placing it in the trunk, Johnny setting his in as well.

"You guys are all packed? Perfect," Dutch said as they piled in and the doors shut. "That'll make leaving easier. Why can't the rest of you be as organized?"

"*Some of us*, were woken up because some *idiot* had some *idea* he had to share at 3 am," Bobby grumbled as they headed to the resort.

"Hey," Dutch said. "You said it was a good idea."

"Just write it down next time. Share it at a normal time. Like a normal person. I thought you'd like hurt yourself or something. Thought I was going to have to drive you to the ER."

Dutch laughed. "You've only had to do that once."

"Once is too much."

Dutch parked at the resort and they climbed out, heading to the

dining room.

They threw their jackets at the same big table from the day before and Daniel turned to head to the buffet when Johnny's hand grabbed his wrist and then let go suddenly as if he'd burned himself on Daniel's skin.

Daniel looked at him confused.

The other guys hadn't left.

"We're...I was thinking...we've got postcards to send," Johnny said holding the two Daniel had filled out yesterday and forgotten about.

"Oh, right," Daniel said.

"Okay, we'll see you when you get back," Jimmy said.

He was smiling.

Daniel wondered why he looked pleased.

Maybe the ex-cobras worried about Johnny knew that they were all Johnny had. That table of four teens was it, all Johnny had left and maybe Johnny was trying to move forward. Trying to heal and maybe this was working.

Maybe spending time with Daniel was helping.

Maybe making a new friend out of an old enemy *could* help.

Maybe they liked having Daniel around.

It was curious. Strange.

He followed Johnny through the resort. Johnny passed back the two postcards and Daniel took them, walking beside him through the halls towards a large wooden desk where an old man in uniform stood.

"Good morning gentleman," the man said with a warm smile.

"We'd like to send some postcards," Johnny said pulling out his wallet.

He was always so damn fast with that thing.

Daniel handed over the postcards.

"Local," the man said with a smile pulling out a booklet and carefully removing some stamps, running them over a wet sponge and sticking them in the corner.

Johnny set some cash on the counter.

The man smiled and quickly stamped both of them with an ink stamp, then handing them to Daniel.

He leaned on the counter and pointed towards the wall. "Send them down the chute."

Daniel carried them over to the wall.

There was a long glass part of the wall, a chute going through the floor, and a metal piece that said "Outgoing Mail" with a slot.

Daniel flipped the postcards over in his hands. The stamp was of the mountain, the additional ink had the date in a circle with snowflakes coming down. It was elegant.

His mother and Mr. Miyagi would appreciate it.

He slipped them through the slot and watched them flutter their way down, gone in an instant to start their journey.

He turned.

Johnny was collecting his change, putting it into his wallet, and then turning and walking back.

"Breakfast?" Johnny asked.

"Starving."

After breakfast, they all stood bundled up at the start of a trail through the mountains. An instructor was explaining how to use the snowmobiles. They were brightly colored with brightly colored helmets.

They'd managed to rent the last five.

Apparently, they were popular and they had to keep some on hand for emergency services so they couldn't rent out all that they had.

No one put up much of a fight over it, which Daniel found amusing.

He'd expected the guys to demand, to stomp their feet like the spoiled rich kids they were.

But they just nodded with understanding.

"I'll share since you were going to pay for me anyway, this way it's cheaper," Daniel told Johnny.

"You sure?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah, but I wanna drive."

Johnny frowned but slowly nodded.

No one said anything about it.

Just heading off down the trail.

Daniel put on his helmet, took one more look at the map, and slid his legs over the lime green snowmobile.

He looked back.

He'd expected Johnny's arms around his waist, had been looking forward to it.

He'd felt Johnny sit down but he wasn't touching him.

Johnny's hands were holding onto the seat. Daniel rolled his eyes.

"If you sit like that I might not notice if you fly off," Daniel said. He watched as Johnny didn't move. "Put your arms around me. We're not going anywhere until you do."

That worked.

Johnny let go of the seat and put his hands gently on Daniel's hips.

Daniel let go of the handles, put his hands over Johnny's, and wrapped them around himself. "You're not going to break me, or whatever you're worried about. So like actually hold on, okay?"

Daniel shifted, assured Johnny wasn't going to let go he pressed the handle the way the instructor had said and they started forward.

It was fun Daniel thought as they shot down the path.

He remembered the guys talking.

Some sort of race to the end of the trail.

He could do that.

He could speed along, fly along the path, through the snow, warm because Johnny was pressed up to his back.

He wondered if riding bikes like the ex-cobras had was as fun, as exhilarating.

He turned along the path, he could see them.

They hadn't lost too much time.

The pines were covered in snow and it smelled like winter. It smelled like cold and snow and pine trees.

He turned the other way and felt Johnny tense, as Daniel took a different path, away from his friends, like one of the paintings of Greek monsters carrying off women that Daniel had seen in a museum.

Centaurs unusually he thought he remembered.

He wanted to laugh.

Johnny would see.

Daniel wasn't carrying him off.

Not this time at least.

He was going to win.

The path went round and round, swerving one way then the other, and Johnny held on tight, tighter than before. His legs pressed closely to Daniel's. Daniel wondered if he was scared.

That made him want to laugh more. Johnny, scared of him? Ha! Never. Not in a million years.

The path broke through to the end of the trail, to where it settled into a large clearing and Daniel slowed to a stop. He turned the engine off

and leaned back against Johnny, lowering his hands down to Johnny's thighs.

"We win," he said laughing with delight.

Johnny sat back a bit looking and Daniel followed his gaze, hearing the sounds of the others coming along down the path.

"See?" Daniel asked giving Johnny's thighs a squeeze.

It was a habit now. He'd never be able to break it and Daniel didn't want to even try. He liked it.

Johnny carefully slid off the back of the snowmobile.

Daniel took off his helmet and got up as well, leaning smugly against the snowmobile, helmet in his arms as the other four came to a stop.

"How?" Bobby asked eyes wide.

"Took a different path," Daniel said with a grin.

He liked the stunned looks on their faces.

"You've never been here before," Jimmy said.

"I looked at the map," Daniel said.

"Smart," Tommy said in awe.

"Thank you," Daniel said still grinning. "So now what?"

He spotted Dutch with an eyebrow raised behind the others, holding up a snowball in his hand and Daniel nodded, ducking and scooping up his own and sending it flying.

Chaos erupted as the guys scattered.

Daniel burst out laughing, ducking behind the snowmobile.

He got hit a couple of times, but it was the least painful hit he'd ever gotten from the ex-cobras. And like every time before he gave his best in response. He couldn't run. He knew he shouldn't. So he just used the snowmobile as cover and lobbed his snowballs over.

Johnny took his hits, not hiding, pummeling those ahead of him.

He was too easy a target, too big.

They all threw snow at Johnny and then suddenly Johnny took off running.

He *was* fast Daniel realized.

The way he shot off across the clearing.

The snowball fight continued, shrieks as the ex-cobras turned on one another.

Daniel slipped onto the back of the snowmobile, sticking his helmet back on and chasing after Johnny.

It didn't take long to catch up on the snowmobile but Johnny was still running.

Daniel cut him off, slowing down, turning it off, and trying to lean nonchalantly.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," Johnny said slowing to a stop, it sounds automatic and shaky.

Daniel didn't believe it.

He wasn't out of breath, running through snow at such a fast pace. But his eyes were wide, panicked.

Daniel saw snow melting near his neck and shuddered.

"Want to build a snowman instead?" Daniel asked, sliding off the back and taking his helmet off again.

He reached out and took Johnny's hands, scared he'd bolt again.

"I haven't built one in a long time, might be fun. We could try to make a giant one."

It took a bit of coaxing but soon Johnny was helping him roll snow, they started with a little ball and then kept adding to it.

Eventually, they could roll it and Daniel didn't think he'd ever gotten snow to roll in his life.

He'd always given up and just piled it all together, pushed it, and

packing it together until it grew bigger.

But they get it to roll and continued, pushing it together until it was up to Daniel's hip.

The largest ball of snow he'd ever made, and then they made another.

Daniel's eyes kept shifting to Johnny, checking in on him.

The look was gone, the look of a frightened animal on the run.

His cheek were flushed from the cold making his blue eyes just so much brighter, focused at the task on hand.

Daniel found himself talking about Newark, about winters there, about attempting to build snowmen on the sidewalk, going to a park to build snowmen, snow angels, the one time he went ice fishing.

He mentioned his neighbor, someone he didn't talk about much, the neighbor who Daniel missed, the one he wanted to ask for advice now more than ever before.

He talked about hot chocolate and how there was a shop he went to after school that made it the French way, all thick and practically a pudding and how he got sick one year from drinking it almost daily, how one day he drank five in a row and had to miss school the next day. And Johnny listened.

Johnny helped roll the second ball of snow and together they lifted it onto the first ball of snow, very carefully and they stood around it, arms out, waiting for it to collapse but it held.

Spurred on by success they went to work on the next one, the last one.

"Do you feel like you've gotten to do at least *some* things you wanted to do?" Daniel asked.

Daniel felt bad, like he came on Johnny's trip and took over.

Johnny spent his trip babysitting Daniel. Doing things Daniel wanted to do because he couldn't do other things. Daniel agreed to a snowball fight which sent Johnny running.

Not as a joke, but *actually* running.

Johnny glanced over at him, the ball was practically perfect and he

lifted it up and set it atop the other two. It was almost the same height as Daniel.

"I liked looking at the snow sculptures," Johnny said stepping back and studying their snowman. "I liked eating dinner with everyone, playing games, watching them lose. I'm sure we'll have a good time in the thermal pools..."

Daniel stepped closer to him. "But did you get to do **anything** you wanted to do?"

"I'm having fun," Johnny said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Are you?"

Daniel looked at their snowman and nodded. "I haven't made a snowman this nice my whole life."

"This was it?" Johnny asked, a gentle teasing tone. "All you wanted was to make a snowman?"

"Driving is fun too. Thought I scared you," Daniel said teasing back.

"You did," Johnny said. "Thought you were going to drive us into something."

The teasing felt a little awkward. Like they were trying to find their footing again. But Daniel appreciated the effort, it was better then an hour ago, chasing Johnny down and swearing he looked like he was going to try and jump, try and soar over Daniel and the snowmobile and continue on through the woods.

"You gotta trust me," Daniel said with a teasing grin. "I will not steer us wrong."

Johnny frowned, he was thinking.

Daniel started to laugh. "Are you seriously trying to think of a time I've steered us wrong?"

"There's got to be one," Johnny said, brows furrowed.

Oh, Daniel was going to jump him.

Daniel pushed, hands flat out on Johnny's chest, and shoved.

Johnny reached out snagging Daniel's jacket and they went tumbling into the snow with a satisfying fwump.

Daniel laughed, delighted until Johnny adjusted his grip and he found himself lifted up and off of Johnny and thrown into the nearest snowdrift.

Daniel blinked up at the bright blue sky and popped up out of the snow, annoyed.

He caught Johnny, a bright smile on his face, delight in his eyes, and his heart melted.

He hadn't seen that smile. Ever.

If throwing Daniel into a snowbank caused that, a safe playful game, then Johnny could do it whenever he wanted.

He wanted to capture that look.

He wanted that smile directed at him forever.

"You okay?" Johnny asked, pulling himself out of the snow and walking over.

Daniel watched him, the way he moved, shaking snow off of himself and leaning over, the smile was slipping, concern, a twinge of regret.

Johnny held out his hand to Daniel and Daniel took it, yanking Johnny down into the snow with him.

He stuck his gloved hand to his mouth, bit the tip of the index finger glove, and yanked his hand free, letting the glove drop.

He stuck his hand in the snow, waited for a second, and then slid it up under Johnny's jacket, under his sweater, pressing his hand onto his warm skin. He cackled when Johnny yelped, jumping up, that quick well-trained movement, his arms wrapping around himself.

Daniel grinned standing up and waiting.

When Mr. Miyagi said he'd train Johnny Daniel had been tentative, fearful, jealous.

What if he asked them to spar?

Johnny always took things far, he'd been trained to take things too far,

to **end** them.

But now Daniel wanted to go home and tell Mr. Miyagi to *get the training started, teach him, so we can play. I want to spar with him.*

Sparing with Mr. Miyagi was always quiet and soft, it was training, learning, but Daniel always held back his punches, his kicks. Even though he knew Mr. Miyagi was strong, he still didn't want to hurt him.

With Johnny he wouldn't have to pull his actions.

Johnny could take it and Daniel was pretty sure if it was *sparring* Daniel could take what Johnny dished out. If it was one on one.

Johnny had snow in his hair.

Daniel walked to him and brushed it out of his hair with his bare hand.

He couldn't stop smiling.

He heard the sound of the snowmobiles, the sounds of their motors getting louder.

He looked back, blowing warmth into his hand before putting the glove back on.

"We were thinking of taking the long way back, supposed to be a good view of the mountains," Tommy said.

"Nice snowman," Dutch said and Daniel was pretty sure he *wasn't* being sarcastic.

Daniel looked up at Johnny who nodded.

"We'll follow," Daniel said going to their snowmobile and grabbing their helmets.

He passed one to Johnny. He straddled the snowmobile and waited for Johnny who looked at their snowman one last time, then around at the clearing.

The guys were already pulling away.

Johnny finally turned after taking in a deep breath of the cold air and letting it out in a cloud.

He put his helmet on and looked at the snowmobile and Daniel.

He didn't immediately wrap his arms around Daniel, he was slow, tentative, but he found the same position as before without needing to be ordered or moved to do so.

Progress.

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

Daniel squeezed the handle and they shot off across the clearing.

He wondered if his mother would kill him if he told her he wanted to ride on a bike.

Maybe.

But he wanted to try it, he doubted Johnny would let him drive *his* bike, but he could show Johnny how someone would hold on properly without needing prompting. Plus there would be a chance he could shift his grip, move his hands.

The other snowmobiles were ahead of them again, but Daniel didn't take any shortcuts.

He wanted to see the view they promised. It was so peaceful on the paths through the woods.

He slowed down, he wasn't going to lose them.

He wanted to savor it.

The trees full of snow, the air.

"Everything okay?" Johnny asked softly.

"Everything's perfect," Daniel breathed.

The snowmobiles up the hill were slowing down as they turned and when they got there they'd stopped and Daniel could see why.

There was a break in the trees. They could see for miles, the other white-covered mountain peaks, the trees covered in snow. They could see the roads, little lines with tiny cars moving on them, it looked like kid's toys. It was all breathtaking, the way the sun hit the snow and it

sparkled. There were a few low clouds working their way along the mountains and past it, past the other peaks was the valley, were the cities.

Daniel wondered if that was the direction of their valley, if somewhere down there was his mother and Mr. Miyagi.

"Damn," Johnny breathed so close to Daniel it sent a shiver down his spine.

"Yeah."

After a while, Dutch turned. "Lunch?" he asked.

The guys agreed and Daniel followed them back to the start of the path.

They returned the bikes and walking back to the resort felt a little weird.

Daniel needed to stretch out his legs.

Lunch was different from the day before, with them all at the table, the guys talking about their snowball fight, of the view, of how cool the snowmobiles were and how it was a good idea.

Daniel ate, pressing his leg up against Johnny's.

He never pulled away and if Daniel didn't know better it'd give him hope.

But he'd seen the way the ex-cobras used to hang around Johnny. Before the tournament, at the tournament, they always had their arms slung around him, touching him.

He was used to it.

This was probably normal to him and while it had started out as a way to try and extend some sort of comfort, Daniel now wanted a response out of Johnny.

Some acknowledgment that Daniel was different or could be different.

Daniel bit into his sandwich.

Technically they'd become friends the day before, trying to grab Johnny's hand and rush him past friendship seemed like a bad move.

Mr. Miyagi had talked about moving slowly with Johnny. Not telling him he was training him because he needed help, needed to heal.

Mr. Miyagi probably would frown at the idea of Daniel trying to start a relationship so soon after ending his last one, especially with someone who got hit with a snowball and it triggered a fight or flight response.

He needed time to recover.

Daniel drank his soda sourly.

He wanted things to be easy, but they were never easy.

He was sure Mr. Miyagi had some saying or lesson about how it made life better, about the importance of it.

If anyone hadn't had an easy life it was Mr. Miyagi and complaining that what? He couldn't just spin Johnny, dip him and kiss him in front of everyone?

It just wouldn't seem like a big deal to Mr. Miyagi, who'd been to war, who'd fought people, who'd lost his wife and son.

Their struggles weren't even on the same level.

Everything that'd gone wrong in Daniel's life, a hellish semester that turned into whatever this was now, felt so small in comparison, and yet Mr. Miyagi still listened and took his concerns seriously, worried over every bruise seen or unseen.

He was feeling homesick he realized all of a sudden.

He wanted to see Mr. Miyagi.

He needed advice, even if he didn't know how to ask for it.

After lunch they headed to the thermal pools, there was a gift shop along the way and Daniel walked in with Johnny, looking around.

He found some swim trunks and again before Daniel could pull out his own wallet, distracted by the snow globes and the snowboards on the walls Johnny had paid and the tags were cut off and the bag was pushed into Daniel's hands.

So much for renting.

He'd have to tell his mother how fast Johnny was at paying.

He knew she'd rise to the challenge, it was like her favorite past time with her friends and his uncle, and she'd probably be upset to learn that Daniel hadn't paid for a single thing the whole trip because Johnny was too fast and when Johnny wasn't fast he was adamant because his mother gave him money specifically to pay for Daniel.

It seemed weird to Daniel that Mrs. Lawrence offered to pay for him.

Daniel had gotten the opinion when they met that she didn't like Daniel.

She knew everything, her eyes were too sharp and Daniel was pretty sure if she saw him now, saw how he touched her son, the way his fingers lingered she'd see straight through him.

He'd have to avoid her.

But his mother wouldn't allow it. His mother would make him invite her to dinner as a thank you and the thought of the glamorous Mrs. Lawrence in their apartment felt daunting. She'd see him under a microscope, see how he lived and would judge before Daniel even got to start building other floors on the foundation.

She had the ability to keep them apart.

Johnny told her everything.

He wondered, flushing in embarrassment if he told her that Daniel had scratched up his leg, if she knew he'd pushed him into the sand like a kid having a tantrum, if she knew that Daniel had kissed him, touched as much as Johnny would let him touch.

If she spoke openly, if she came over, would she tell his mother?

Oh he'd die.

She'd murder him.

Not because it was Johnny, though they hadn't talked about that, he was trying to think about how to tell her, but he didn't think she'd care, but because he'd gotten drunk and he hadn't been polite and sweet. He hadn't been good.

"You okay Daniel?" Bobby asked shutting his locker door.

Daniel blinked. "Uh, yeah."

He finished changing quickly, there were other people in the locker room for the thermal pools, kids chatting and laughing, it was busy.

He shoved his things in the locker, locked it and slipped the wrist coil with the key around his wrist, and followed Bobby who was waiting patiently out to the thermal pools.

It was like a regular pool but vast.

There were different sections, separated around a large enclosed space with a high ceiling and the echoing sound of people talking. There were men and women laying out on poolside chairs and Bobby waved to the group sitting at a table and Daniel followed him over.

"I know it looks like a pool," Bobby said. "But they pump it full of minerals and stuff, and it's hotter than a normal pool. So you gotta be careful. This isn't a pool for playing. You get too hot you get out, otherwise there's a chance you'll get overheated and faint. But there is a cooling pool." Bobby pointed out a sign that said Cold Pool. "So you dip between the different warming pools and then into the cold pool and then back and forth as much as you want. Should be good...uh...for your knee."

Daniel tried very hard to keep his eyes on Johnny's face.

Johnny was listening to Tommy who was sitting at the table. He glanced up as they approached and the blue eyes fell on Daniel.

Daniel swallowed hard, he could do this, he could focus, he could behave.

He took the proffered towel and glanced around.

Dutch had a nasty bruise on his torso he grinned at Daniel.

"Fell off my board," he laughed.

They were actually pretty beaten up as Daniel looked around.

"We usually come here on the second day, but usually first thing," Jimmy said stretching, his shoulder was bruised. "It's the only thing that gets us out of the lodge. It helps."

"Food usually also motivates," Tommy said clapping Jimmy on the shoulder and then heading off to the pools.

They headed to the water and sunk in with sighs.

Daniel followed watching as Johnny sat down.

It was like a vast jacuzzi and Daniel thought of Ali at the party making out with a college guy and shuddered.

He didn't want to get in.

He hugged his chest and looked around, then breathed deeply.

This wasn't the same.

He stepped down the little steps into the warm water. It felt like one of the fancy baths his mother sometimes made after his old soccer practices. Full of oils and bath salts, where the water was softer than normal, comforting his injuries. Though he was pretty sure bruises were supposed to be cold water or ice.

He sat somewhere in the only available space next, between Johnny and Bobby. It was like they had their own private one, just enough space for the six of them.

It was quiet.

It was weird.

They did this every year.

Probably hungover.

Johnny definitely hungover after his what was it? Expensive pink Cadillac that always knocked him on his ass?

"So, every year you drag Johnny here while he's hungover?" Daniel asked.

"He fought every time," Jimmy said, tilting his head back. "This is so much better than every other year. We'd try to wake him up and he'd swat at us. You don't try to wake up hungover Johnny. He wakes up in fight mode."

"He also whined every single time, didn't want to get out of bed, like a cat that sinks their claws into the bedding. Took at least two of us, every year to drag him out of his bed," Tommy said. "The other two who lost the game the night before would have to do it. Night one game meant who was going to get plastered, and it was always

Johnny. Night two was whoever was stuck dealing with hungover Johnny."

"First-year was easier. He was scrawny. But after he had his growth spurt it was hell," Dutch said. "But after eating, and sitting in this pool he'd stop his bitching."

Daniel glanced at Johnny. He looked pissed.

Daniel could help but laugh, he wasn't going to start a fight here.

What Dutch had said was real. No matter how much they tormented him, if there were adults around Johnny didn't make a move.

Johnny's eyes pulled from where they were glaring daggers at his friends and to Daniel next to him.

"Sounds like you put up with a lot," he said teasing.

Bobby moved with a sigh on the other side of Daniel and Daniel glanced at him. "Well he's a mess, but our mess. We wouldn't put up with it if he wasn't our friend. If we didn't care."

He spoke fondly and Daniel watched some of the tension in Johnny dissipate. He calmed down a little.

"Disgusting," Dutch said but he was smiling.

The silence was more comfortable and Daniel relaxed. The tightness in his knee was fading a bit from the warmth. He leaned his head back and relaxed. After a while Johnny stood.

"I'm going to the cold pool," he said and stepped out of the water and walking away.

"He can only handle so much heat," Jimmy explained. "Has a low tolerance for it. Also burns easy."

Tommy laughed. "He's so fucking sensitive, like a flower."

It was a weird image but he liked the thought. The questions that had been slowly rumbling around were now burning.

It felt wrong to ask while Johnny wasn't there but also while he was.

But he wanted to know.

"Tommy said you all sleepover at Johnny's..."

"Yeah, so?" Dutch said stiffly.

"How often does he have nightmares?" Daniel asked.

Bobby sat forward studying Daniel's face. "Did he have nightmares?"

"Yeah. I think so. He just was all stiff and...not breathing right."

"We don't....or I haven't ever...noticed," Dutch said with a frown looking at the others. "When I spend the night he wakes up but..."

"Fuck," Bobby whispered, he turned bodily towards Daniel, "We didn't fucking notice. Like he's always awake. We spent the night recently and he woke up before we got up, was all dressed, and listening to his Walkman. He didn't sleep, he didn't go back to sleep. He's done that...several times. Always says it's because we're too loud."

"Says we snore, but I asked my aunt and uncle and I don't snore," Tommy said.

"They could just be being nice," Jimmy said.

"The girl I was seeing said I didn't snore either," Tommy said stiffly.

"It's probably because of Kreese," Dutch said with a frown. "I mean he might've always been...but now? That's all Kreese. It's gotta be."

Bobby put his face in his hands. "I don't know what to do to help him. It's fucking Kreese. That's a fucking huge wound. I keep thinking, maybe Johnny will just bounce back, he always bounces back. But now I'm wondering if he ever really does, or if it's just pretend."

"He keeps flinching. Johnny never used to flinch. He'd get that obnoxious look in his eye but wouldn't flinch," Tommy said.

"I keep forgetting, I keep touching him and he flinches and it's so not Johnny that it scares the shit out of me," Dutch said.

"I think I figured out where," Daniel said slowly. "I've been testing it." Their eyes were on him. He held his hand up to his shoulder, where a short-sleeved shirt sleeve would fall. "You can't touch him here. He'll flinch....and if you touch his neck, anywhere...just don't, I think it's worse."

"That makes sense. That's where Kreese had him," Jimmy said softly.

The air was tense, dangerous. The looks in the ex-cobra's eyes sent a shiver down Daniel's spine. It was like when they would corner him as a group when they'd laugh, that atmosphere right before they'd fight him. There wasn't the same dark delight in their faces though, that it was fun to fight, it was much harder, colder now.

"Kreese should pay," Dutch said coldly.

"We couldn't do anything last time."

"We didn't have a plan."

"He always said you hurt one of us you hurt all of us."

"Maybe we should show him everything he taught us?"

Daniel swallowed hard.

"I-I'm going to go to the cooling pool," he said.

He was panicking.

He knew it wasn't directed at him, but the rage, the feeding frenzy that was starting, he had to leave before it switched something on in him.

He stood shakily and made his way to the cold pool, towards Johnny who glanced up at him as he sunk into the refreshingly cold water by his side.

He breathed, he was safe, it wasn't him they were after.

Not this time.

Natural Enemies

Chapter Notes

> More beautiful fan art ❤ (With a calming art process video): https://desolateice.tumblr.com/post/658196976991633408/me-again-obsessing-over-the-latest-chapter-of-root

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The water was soothing, calming. Johnny stretched out in the cool pool, letting the water cover him and he breathed. He heard familiar footsteps and cracked an eye open as a pale Daniel came over. He sat up quickly.

"You okay?"

Daniel sunk down into the cold water next to him. "Yeah."

He didn't believe Daniel, but Johnny also sometimes lied about how he felt. Tried to make things seem less like a big deal.

"They mess with you?" Johnny asked starting to get up but Daniel grabbed his wrist.

"No. Just, got too hot," Daniel said.

Johnny frowned. When he got too hot he turned pink all over.

He'd never seen someone turn pale.

But he settled back into the pool.

Daniel shut his eyes and breathed, he sat close, his fingertips brushing against Johnny's.

Johnny didn't want to go home.

He was glad he wasn't hungover.

Glad he'd be able to enjoy small moments like this, even if they meant nothing.

They dried off, ate dinner at the resort, and then made their way back

to the lodge.

Everyone cleaned up.

Trash was thrown in the dumpster, all the soda and beer that wasn't consumed was repacked up in the cooler along with the leftover desserts.

The guys ran around repacking the explosions of their room and Daniel and Johnny just sat on the couch together, their stuff already packed and in the van.

Johnny was smirking, the guys were complaining.

Daniel kept yawning and Johnny wondered how much sleep he got.

If he had like a kid's bedtime and all the excitement and keeping him up late just drained him.

It was dark when they finally left to head home in the van and the guys talked in their warm murmur of conversation.

Trying to plan out their next outing.

Daniel's head kept lowering and he'd snap it back up when he realized he was drifting off.

He looked startled but then his eyes would shut and his head would lower again.

His head bumped against Johnny's shoulder, but then after a moment, he sat up again.

When they got out of the mountains Daniel moved, closer, and closer, and down.

Johnny sat stiffly unsure what was happening until the weight of Daniel's head made its way onto Johnny's lap. He didn't say anything but curled his arm around Johnny's leg, his own legs curled up on the rest of the bench, and promptly fell asleep.

Dutch met Johnny's eyes on a rearview mirror. Then at a red light he looked back and broke out into a big grin, smiling and humming the rest of the drive, fingers tapping at the steering wheel along with the soft old music he was playing on the radio.

They stopped too suddenly as they got back into the outskirts of the

city.

Dutch cursed softly.

Johnny's hand went to Daniel, holding him carefully, so he wouldn't slide.

He hesitated, to pull his hand away, but Daniel didn't wake up, he didn't move.

It might happen again, so he left his hand where it was.

He looked out the window at the roads, the streetlights, and the start of the familiar city.

He was going to miss this.

He knew they had more stuff planned, more outings, more things, but there weren't going to be a lot of sleepovers and he was going to miss having Daniel next to him.

When the school year came to an end this, like everything else would probably also end.

Daniel might go off to college, might move somewhere new with his mother, might return to Newark, might go on some adventure with Mr. Miyagi, and leave Johnny in California, like everyone else was going to.

He'd just be a memory, a boy once an enemy turned friend.

A boy who liked him but would never tell him.

They pulled up in front of the South Seas Apartment complex and Johnny blinked, surprised.

Dutch had a good memory.

He gently shook Daniel's shoulder.

"Daniel, you're home," Johnny said softly, aware of how quiet the van was.

Daniel grumbled a little but pushed himself up, all his weight on his hands, pressure on Johnny's thighs, blinking and looking around, staring blearily at Johnny.

"Huh?"

"Home," Johnny said again.

Daniel sat the rest of the way up rubbing his eyes and getting his feet off the rest of the seat. He headed slowly towards the front and out the open door Bobby had opened.

"Make sure he gets in okay," Tommy said turning back to look at Johnny.

Johnny unbuckled his seatbelt and followed.

Daniel was standing on the sidewalk stretching and yawning.

Johnny opened the trunk, got Daniel's bag, Mrs. LaRusso's lasagna pan, and shut it again, returning to Daniel.

"Through the gate Daniel, you can't sleep out here," Johnny said softly.

He shifting the bag on his shoulder and gently pressed on Daniel's back, herding him through the gate and up the stairs.

Johnny knocked on room twenty and Daniel leaned back against him while they waited.

"See you at school tomorrow. Get some sleep," Johnny said softly as he heard the footsteps approach.

"Mmm," Daniel said, he was barely awake.

They'd worn him out even though it wasn't as intense a retreat as it normally was.

The door opened and Mrs. LaRusso looked out, warm light spilling out into the dark hallway.

She took in Daniel who yawned, his whole body stretching as he did so, and Johnny.

Johnny gently nudged Daniel who took the movement to start walking into his apartment. He automatically kissed his mother's cheek and disappeared into the back of the apartment, into his room.

"I think he had fun," Johnny said setting the bag on the ground on the inside of the apartment but not coming in. He handed the pan to Mrs. LaRusso. "It was delicious. Thank you."

"I'm glad you liked it. You'll have to come by for dinner sometime. I'll make something else for you."

Johnny smiled softly. "I'd like that. Have a good evening Mrs. LaRusso."

"Thank you Johnny, you too."

Johnny waved and hurried down the steps and back past the pool and through the gate to the van.

He slumped into the back.

"So, did you get a goodnight's kiss?" Tommy asked.

Johnny kicked the back of his seat. "No, and shut up."

"Any progress?" Jimmy called from the front.

"We're friends," Johnny said softly, warmly.

"Friends," Dutch said. "Seriously?"

"I'm happy with it," Johnny said. "It's better than Daniel hating me or being scared of me. Even if it was deserved."

Bobby turned in his seat looking at Johnny in the dim light. "Seriously? He kept touching you. And you're going to stick with friends?"

"It's how he is," Johnny said with a frown. "Clingy."

"To you!" Dutch said.

"Well, you are all still a little intimidating. I'm like a couple of steps above you all," Johnny said a little smugly.

"You better be a couple of damn steps above the rest of us, the rest of us don't want to fuck him," Dutch said. "Be pretty pathetic if you were lower than us."

"I didn't say I wanted-"

"Make love to him, whatever makes you feel better," Dutch said rolling his eyes and pulling away from the curb. "Dude, either he likes you or he's the clingiest mother fucker I've ever seen. Like hell, I like the kid, he's easy to please, easy to talk with, can cook and kick-ass, but if he

laid his head on my lap like that I'd be expecting a fucking blow job, not some peaceful nap. If this is fucking friendship then Johnny you're in hell and I'm so fucking sorry."

"I think you gotta make a move," Jimmy said. "Test the waters."

"I'm not going to make a move," Johnny said.

"Why the hell not?"

"I don't even know if he is over Ali."

"So?"

"You saw how I was when she dumped me? I was not in a good space to have a relationship. And even if Daniel has forgiven me for all my shit...I doubt he'd immediately be ready to date me even if they mutually broke up."

Dutch groaned. "I'm giving you till prom."

"What does that mean?"

"Test the waters, and if he's still fucking clingy and full of lingering touches and you're still being a wimp then I'm going to point-blank ask him if he likes you enough to touch dicks or whatever with you at prom."

"You can't rush stuff like this," Bobby said softly. "There's too much history, there's..."

"Shut up Bobby," Dutch said. "Maybe I don't get it, but it looks like he likes you and *we know* you like him. And I sure as hell am not going to sit here and watch you two shyly looking at each other like some stupid regency-era romance until we graduate because you're chickenshit."

Johnny sighed, Dutch made it sound so easy.

But it was the way Dutch was, and this was him trying, showing he cared.

It was better than anything Johnny ever could have hoped for from Dutch. He'd been so sure that if Dutch ever found out he'd just never talk to him, would walk the other way and their years of friendship would crumble.

He thought the other guys would go with him.

That it'd just be him and Bobby.

If it was anyone other than Daniel then Johnny would understand.

He agreed with Dutch half the time when they were out and one of the guys talked about a girl he liked.The "oh for the love of god, just go talk to her, I'm tired of listening to you torture yourself. Just find out."

He'd said it too. Had pushed Jimmy or Tommy or Bobby to go make a move, strike first.

Dutch was doing the same thing. As if this was any other relationship, any of the other guys. Treating him like normal.

When they parked in front of his home he patted Dutch on the shoulder.

"Thanks man," he said before hopping out and grabbing his stuff. Dutch leaned out of the window.

"You need anything..." he said. "If shit gets..."

Johnny knew what he meant, that unspoken thing they all knew. He knew the hesitation Dutch had to leave him here. The concern.

"I know," Johnny said waving to them and heading through the gates up to home.

There were some things Johnny had become that childhood him would be disappointed in.

Beating up Daniel was the big one.

His younger self would never understand that. Would never forgive him for that.

But having friends, his younger self would've clung onto that, that someday he'd walk into a karate dojo and make four friends who would have his back no matter what. Even on things he never would've thought they would've. Things he would've thought they'd leave him over.

If he could go back, he'd give himself a hug, and tell himself,

"You'll grow up, big and strong, able to defend yourself and you'll make friends. You'll finally move to a school where you'll have people who'll have your back and they won't leave. You'll do shit to try and shake them off. You'll be annoying. You'll get pissy. You'll have them buy you the stupidest pink expensive drink in a joint and you'll get yourself so drunk you can't stand and they won't leave. They'll take your temper, they'll hold you up when you sway on your feet, they'll stick with you. And one day, without meaning to you'll tell them you also sometimes like guys and they won't leave.

"They won't abandon you.

"And even if you don't ever take them up on it, they'll offer, in quiet moments for you to come stay with them. They'll give you places to run and hide when things get too bad, and just knowing that that's an option will get you through so much.

"And you'll survive.

"You'll make it.

"So just hang in there.

"Because one day you'll beat the shit out of a boy, and he'll fight you back, all fury and desperation and like an absolute idiot strung along by fate, you'll find yourself in love with him and those friends will cheer you on as you struggle with it.

"And it's enough. Enough to get you through to wherever the road ends."

He got to his car, looking at the time wondering if it was too late to go to Mr. Miyagi's and get his bonsai. It wasn't ten yet. So he set his bag in the back and drove off.

He'd missed driving.

He'd missed the Avanti.

He'd missed the warm air on his skin instead of the cold bite of the winter air.

It had been fun, it'd been worth it, but there was something about coming home after a long trip, of traveling the roads he always traveled, that he knew so well and taking in the familiar sounds and smells.

He didn't understand why Daniel talked about Newark all the time when this, when California was so nice, when the Valley had everything you needed.

But then he'd come home and remember what it was like for everything to be familiar and he thought he understood it.

He wondered what it'd be like to see Daniel's old stomping grounds, to walk with him around New York City.

Johnny had looked Newark up on a map, thinking it was some tiny town in New Jersey but it was across the river from New York City, *practically was* New York City in Johnny's mind.

He wondered what it was like to grow up so close to the Statue of Liberty, to wander around Times Square, to eat at bodegas and go ice skating in Central Park.

Johnny wanted to go.

He wanted to ask Daniel to take him to New Jersey, show him around, wanted to see what it was like to sit around with the LaRusso's, all chatterboxes, and see how Daniel fit in amongst them.

To see where he grew up, his favorite places to eat, all the stuff he always talked about.

He wanted to go, and he wanted to hold Daniel's hand, and he wanted to ride on one of the rides he'd mentioned was at Coney Island, together.

Johnny shook his head.

He hoped the older man was still awake.

He remembered that Sid's parents used to go to bed before 8, ate their dinners at 4 pm.

Mr. Miyagi seemed old but not nearly as old as them.

He also hoped he hadn't left the man waiting too long, hoped he wasn't waiting up, holding the bonsai because Johnny had promised he come and get it.

The lights were on at Mr. Miyagi's and his head popped out when he heard the crunch of the Avanti's wheels on the dirt.

Johnny felt relieved.

Hopping out of the car in a hurry to meet him.

"Sorry, I'm so late Mr. Miyagi. Thank you for waiting."

"Johnny-san have good trip?"

"Yes," Johnny said. "It was nice."

Mr. Miyagi smiled then waved his hand. "Come in. Miyagi's friends send gift. Maybe Johnny-san help Miyagi."

Johnny nodded, following Mr. Miyagi in. Sitting on at the table in the dining room was a pile of round objects that looked like they were dusted in powder. Mr. Miyagi sat down and Johnny sat down across from him.

"Friends send new years gift, it came late, but still very good," Mr. Miyagi said pouring Johnny some tea. "Eat."

Johnny picked up one of the balls off the table and it squished softly between his fingers, the outside was softer than he expected but there was a weight to it. He took a bite, the center was dark, it was sweet but not too sweet.

Mr. Miyagi popped one in his mouth and smiled. "Miyagi's friends make many, and send to friends to share with family, always send Miyagi too many."

"Can you freeze them?" Johnny asked.

Miyagi nodded. "Always do."

"What are they?" Johnny asked.

"Mochi."

"Mochi," Johnny said finishing his. "I am sure Daniel will help you eat these."

Mr. Miyagi laughed. "I am very sure Daniel-san will help."

Johnny smiled, understanding the laugh. Every time Johnny visited Mr. Miyagi Daniel was eating something, digging around in his fridge like it was his own home. Mr. Miyagi seemed to enjoy it, the familiarity of having Daniel around.

They sat in companionable silence for a while and Johnny ate a few more and drank the tea Mr. Miyagi made him. "Do you need help with anything Mr. Miyagi?"

Mr. Miyagi smiled and shook his head. "Not right now."

Johnny glanced at the clock, he should go soon.

He didn't want to leave.

He didn't want to go home.

"Something wrong?"

Johnny looked at Mr. Miyagi, surprised but also not surprised. "No. Just the usual end of vacation blues."

Mr. Miyagi nodded. "Understandable. Tomorrow school?"

"Yes."

Mr. Miyagi set down his tea and looked at Johnny with a steady gaze. "Johnny-san do Miyagi favor?"

"Of course."

"Keep eye on Daniel-san?"

Johnny opened his mouth but Mr. Miyagi held up his hand.

"Daniel-san come to California unhappy. Make only two friends. Ali-san and Miyagi." Mr. Miyagi held up two fingers then dropped one. "Now Daniel-san only have Miyagi. Miyagi not teenager. No school. Daniel-san now alone. Johnny-san make sure Daniel-san enjoy end of high school. Very important. Making amends but also good for here." Mr. Miyagi said tapping at his chest. "Friendship very important. Good for Daniel-san, good for Johnny-san."

Johnny looked down at his tea and frowned. "Mr. Miyagi, my friends and I, we're not being altruistic, inviting Daniel along is for really selfish reasons."

"To clear conscious? Results the same. Johnny-san likes Daniel-san yes?"

Johnny looked up startled feeling his ears burn, wondering if Mr. Miyagi saw through him. He swallowed hard and nodded.

"Miyagi meet Daniel-san early, know of interest in karate but not teach Daniel-san. One night, Daniel-san come home upset. Yelling with mother, throw bike in trash, almost in tears, outside Miyagi's shop. Miyagi worry. Bike not problem, fix bike easy, think nothing of it. Then one day Daniel-san take Miyagi to Johnny-san's dojo and Miyagi almost laugh. Johnny-san, what is cobra's natural enemy?"

"A mongoose," Johnny said softly, remembering the night they sent Daniel down the ravine with a shudder.

"Miyagi think, why these boys fight so much? Why seem so hard to stop? Then Miyagi walk into cobra dojo with Daniel-san and understand. See how teacher teach. Hear his lessons. Teaching cobras. Remember Daniel-san's bike. Remember fixing bike. Johnny-san know what type of bike Daniel-san bring all the way from Newark?"

Johnny shook his head.

Mr. Miyagi leaned forward.

"Daniel-san's bike a Mongoose. Feel like fate. Mongoose cannot stop fighting cobra, cobra cannot stop fighting mongoose. Cycle only end when one steps out. When one learns. Johnny-san stepped out. End cycle."

"I didn't beat up Daniel because his bike was a Mongoose and I was a cobra," Johnny said. "I didn't have any fated reason or any good reason to start fights with him. I thought I was entitled to a specific life and he disrupted it. He kept making me angry and none of it is a good excuse, there is no good reason. It's awful no matter what."

Mr. Miyagi nodded. "Johnny-san growing, learning, taking responsibility. So, do Miyagi favor, take responsibility for Daniel-san."

Johnny blinked at Mr. Miyagi. "I-I don't know what else I can be doing."

"See something to do, do it. Keep Daniel-san out of trouble. Be friend, yes?"

"Mr. Miyagi, Daniel is..."

Johnny looked back down at his tea.

He knew if someone asked one of his old bullies to be his friend, he'd be furious and betrayed.

He knew Mr. Miyagi was trying to be kind, trying to help and they were friends, now anyway.

"he's very kind. He's chatty, he can be annoying, but he's observant and keeps an eye on me. He won't let me run off on my own and even though everyone tells me to protect him, he'll still chase after me and make sure *I'm* okay. You trained him well in karate and he did amazing. I know tournaments aren't really your thing, right? Peaceful karate for defense is sort of what yours is, so a tournament isn't really a place you'd send a student unless you had to.

"Which you did, but Daniel did amazing. I've won the All-Valley twice, I've won other tournaments. I had the home-field advantage, and he was hurt, and he practically flew Mr. Miyagi. I don't think he actually *needs* me to defend him. He can defend himself fairly well. But he does talk a lot and sometimes it rubs people the wrong way. I know this first hand, but I've also listened to him. A lot. All about Newark and what he thinks of the cafeteria food and cars and anything he rambles on about, and I don't know, I find it kind of peaceful to listen to him talk. I've gotten to know him, and while I don't really feel like I've redeemed myself or fulfilled my responsibilities to Daniel I don't think I've earned his friendship either, but that's not for me to say.

"It's up to Daniel and he moved us there. To friendship and I...friends mean a great deal to me Mr. Miyagi. I...didn't have any for a long time so the ones I do have, even though together we make mistakes and act stupid and get into fights and cause trouble, they're still there for me when I need it. When no one else is. And I do my best by them. Daniel is...important to me, I never would've realized I was on the wrong path if he hadn't come here. I was too stupid. Too entrenched. Too full of myself. Too lost. I probably would've stayed at that dojo with Kreese if he hadn't...if you hadn't..."

Johnny struggled, looking down at the tea. He took a deep breath. "

What I mean to say is you don't need to ask me to be Daniel's friend or to keep an eye on him. He's already honored me with that title," Johnny smiled softly. "So I will do everything I can to be someone worthy of it."

Mr. Miyagi nodded, then stood and walked away then came back with a small box that he set in front of Johnny.

Johnny looked at it.

It was clear on top and full to the brim with mochi.

He looked up at Mr. Miyagi who was holding the bonsai in his arms.

"Like Miyagi say, send too many. Take home."

"Thank you Mr. Miyagi." Johnny said standing and taking the bonsai and the box of mochi.

"No," Mr. Miyagi said shaking his head, "Thank you Johnny-san."

Chapter End Notes

> His bike is a mongoose. And Johnny is a cobra in the movies. Natural enemies. Like dang, the things I never noticed. To be fair though I never ever would've caught that because I know nothing about bikes or that there even was a brand called a mongoose.
>
> http://thekaratekidblog.blogspot.com/2012/04/daniels-bike-mongoose.html
> https://www.welovecycling.com/wide/2014/12/05/dream-bikes-childhood/

Buon appetito!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His mother had waited a long time, had been very patient, but she'd reached the end of her rope and it took a while for Daniel to realize it. The LaRusso's were social. They were used to large gatherings in tiny homes, crammed around busy tables, talking away, balancing several conversations at once, so loud the neighbors complained.

Not having that, being away from everyone they had always known, everyone they loved, was like the ghost they still couldn't talk about without getting teary-eyed.

It left a hole in their hearts that ate away.

"How was the trip?" Lucielle asked when Daniel came out of his room Monday morning.

"Great," Daniel said bursting with tales about the snow, about the snow sculptures, the snowmobiles, the fascinating woman he'd met, and the thermal pools.

"When's your next trip?" Lucille asked quickly when he took a breath.

Her words were careful and her eyes watched him like a hawk as he ate his breakfast.

"I don't know," Daniel said uneasily.

The ex-cobra's promised fun for the rest of the semester, but he doubted it would actually be every weekend.

It seemed impossible to have 24 unique adventures lined up.

They had their own lives and family matters to attend to.

"You'll find out for me, won't you? Especially what Johnny is up to, find a weekend, a Saturday he's free."

Daniel nearly poured orange juice into his eggs, staring at his mother.

"Ma?"

She gave him a stern look. "I'm going to cook that boy something nice. Find out if his mother's free too. We can even invite Mr. Miyagi."

Daniel felt his stomach flop.

There were things he was avoiding. He'd nearly brought up how he felt to his mother several times now but kept chickening out.

He didn't think she'd particularly care, but now it'd feel more like a date, a get to know the parent's date, which was way too much pressure. But he hadn't told her.

Unless he said something in his sleep. But he didn't talk in his sleep. She used to joke that it was the only time she got any peace and quiet.

"Why?" it came out whinier than he meant it.

She hadn't pressed with Ali. She seemed pretty okay with just picking her up for their first date and chauffeuring them around, or meeting up to go out to dinner. She had that look in her eyes. *The mother look*. That *I'm not going to budge about this* air was about her.

"I wanna cook and I got questions," she said with a shrug, like it was the most common reason to invite not only his ex-rival, but *his mother* and his own sensei into their tiny apartment.

"I don't know..."

He couldn't think of any good excuses.

There was no exit strategy.

He prayed the guys had adventures set up for every weekend until they graduated.

That Johnny and his mother weren't free.

Not because he was embarrassed of his home, not anymore. He liked it, compared to the mansion Johnny lived in.

But because his mother had that look in her eyes, that desire to take someone apart in conversation while smiling and loading more pasta on their plate.

It was a trap. Daniel didn't know how much he could hide under that microscopic gaze. Not with Johnny there, not with Mr. Miyagi, and

especially not with Mrs. Lawrence who Daniel already was on bad footing with.

"That's why you *ask* Daniel."

It was the end of the conversation. She'd hear no argument, no plea. His only hope was that they all had plans. Excuses, something.

He wished her a good day and headed to school.

He wondered if he should just tell her. *Ma, I think I like Johnny. More than a friend, and more I think than I liked Ali.*

But it seemed pointless. Why tell her that when he kept hesitating to see how Johnny felt?

Why open the can of worms when there wasn't a relationship happening or on the horizon?

They just made it onto the step entitled friendship and Daniel wasn't even sure if Johnny would climb up to the next step with him. He'd just sit on that step looking down at Johnny wondering why he wasn't up there with him, wishing he'd take his offered hand, or figure it out himself.

If Mr. Miyagi was going to give him relationship advice pertaining to Johnny he was pretty sure it'd be something along the lines of *Johnny-san needs to heal heart first before giving it to Daniel-san.*

And then Daniel would protest he'd take good care of it.

He didn't *always* break stuff. Just his bike, which wasn't his fault, his car which also wasn't his fault, and the brickwork of the Mill's house which Mr. and Mrs. Mills said was already loose so it couldn't really all be Daniel's fault.

He didn't want to ask.

He didn't think he was ready.

But he knew to his mother it was nothing, not a big deal, but also so very dearly important to her.

He rubbed his face after he parked in the school lot and groaned.

He'd *have* to ask. He'd have to find a moment alone with Johnny so it didn't seem weird. But Johnny was popular again. Flocked by girls,

swarms of them, and they wouldn't budge for Daniel.

He was pretty sure if he tried to get around them or past them they'd elbow him in the stomach.

He spotted the Avanti in the parking lot, took a deep breath, and headed in.

Johnny was alone at his locker.

He glanced around.

There were girls, but they hadn't flocked to him. They were going about their business like normal.

He didn't see the ex-cobras either, he hurried to Johnny's locker. He leaned against the one next to it, not thinking, thinking would trip him up. He'd just do what he normally did, what he used to do, when he'd talk to Ali at her locker.

"When's a Saturday you're free?" Daniel asked quickly.

Johnny looked a little startled to see him. Blue eyes widening ever so slightly. His ears were red again, just a light blush of his cheeks. He'd probably scared him. Coming up so suddenly.

He grinned trying to seem as nonchalant as possible.

"Ma wants to invite you and your mother to dinner. She likes to cook. Like a lot. And she likes hosting and, well...it's been too long. She'd really appreciate it. Said she'd make you dinner and your mother and Miyagi. Some Saturday when you're free."

Johnny seemed to still be a little shocked, his folder was upside down and homework was starting to slide out.

Daniel leaned forward catching the falling papers, taking the folder from Johnny's hand, fixing it, and pressing it to Johnny's chest.

"Think about it, let me know okay?" Daniel said tapping a knuckle on the folder and walking off.

Daniel opened his own locker and let out a breath.

His duty to his mother was done and over with and it wasn't that bad and he was fine, it'd gone okay, oh god what sort of weirdo invites someone to a dinner with both their mothers and sensei? What sort of

weird mom puts their kid up to it? Did his mother hate him? Was it some sort of revenge for complaining the whole way to California? An awkward dinner with his mother, Johnny's mother, and Mr. Miyagi. Like some weird parent-teacher conference all gone wrong.

Maybe Johnny wouldn't be free. Maybe he'd have things to do. Maybe his mother wouldn't be free.

Daniel had a sinking feeling that if Johnny's mother wasn't free she'd still expect Daniel to drag Johnny over at some point.

It was because he hadn't bought Johnny lunch yet, wasn't it? Well, it wasn't his fault Johnny was so fast to pay. He always forgot and the next thing Daniel knew he'd missed his opportunity.

At lunch, Tommy said, "Because it was a full weekend trip last weekend I've got family stuff, most of us do I think, but we're thinking of all going to the movies Sunday night if you want to join us, Daniel."

"Thank you, I'll uh think about it," Daniel said.

Daniel looked at Johnny, heart sinking.

It'd be *this* weekend.

There'd be no prep.

He'd have to scrub the whole apartment. His mother would ask why he was scrubbing the apartment, but she'd also never met Johnny's glamourous mother.

Johnny's mother might be in his apartment with Johnny on Saturday. Mr. Miyagi might be there.

He'd have to hide the photo albums. Bury them. Maybe he could run them down to Mr. Miyagi's workshop and hide them there. His mother would never look in the workshop.

"You going to be okay on your own Johnny?" Jimmy asked.

Johnny was playing with his mashed potatoes on his plate. He didn't lookup.

"I might have plans on Saturday. I have to talk to my mother."

Oh fuck. That was his invite. That was him. Johnny's plans were with Daniel. This was happening. His mother would be over the moon.

Daniel was going to die of embarrassment. He'd have to make a list of things they couldn't talk about.

No talking about baby Daniel and giving him baths.

Those pictures were disappearing.

He didn't understand why mothers took those photos.

They were not going to talk about camp or the time when Daniel was little and got sick after eating too many corn dogs before going on one of the rides at Coney Island and then after he was sick he'd started crying because he was hungry and wanted a corn dog again.

Oh god, this was going to be his worst nightmare.

He loved his mother. Very much.

They were going to do this and she would understand the sacrifice he was making.

Because the coolest kid in school was coming to his apartment and was going to sit at his table and he was going to freak out and lunch was over, all the guys were gone but Johnny was standing.

"I'll let you know tomorrow okay?"

"Thanks," Daniel said, practically a squeak.

Before Daniel knew it everything was snowballing.

The Lawrence's were free to attend according to Johnny.

Just the two.

It went unsaid between all parties that Sid wasn't invited.

Mr. Miyagi also said he'd come and his mother was over the moon, flipping through her old family recipes delighted, singing.

It was happening.

And she was keeping a close eye on him out of the corner of her eyes. He tried to sneak the photo albums out but she caught him, without even looking up. Just a click of her tongue and "Put it back Daniel."

So he cleaned.

She couldn't really complain about his cleaning as long as he avoided the kitchen. Scrubbing everything until it shone.

He set the bonsai's out.

Debated about moving his trophy which his mother demanded should be out somewhere they could enjoy it after he'd won.

Daniel didn't know if it was a bad idea to leave it out.

Mrs. Lawrence believed it wasn't rightfully Daniel's and that would easily spark a fight between the two women.

He swallowed his panic and vacuumed the couches.

If it'd just been Johnny it'd have been fine. Johnny and his mother got along. He *thought* they did anyway. They both liked having him around. Wanted to have him over for dinner multiple times a week.

But he knew how his mother got at dinner parties. He knew how quickly the photo albums came out. How she gushed. How she raised the hackles of other mothers who also thought their children were the brightest stars in the skies and it was embarrassing.

And Mrs. Lawrence didn't seem to like Daniel.

They were going to fight, and then...then what?

The Mills hadn't liked Daniel and that had just been for fun, dating Ali had just been something to do. *Oh*, that was mean.

Daniel frowned, pausing in his vacuuming.

Dating Ali *had* been fun, but it hadn't been serious.

Which meant, the panic bubbling up, that *this* was more serious.

That he cared more about what Johnny's mother thought of him. He wanted her to like him. Needed it. Needed a stamp of approval from her.

He'd seen parents who didn't approve of their in-laws. And the fights that broke up. Happened all the time. It was a constant conversation between the adults at all the dinners his mother hosted. One of the top complaints along with job complaints.

Johnny loved his mother. Clearly told her everything, that or she was the scariest mother he'd ever met who knew things her son *didn't* tell her.

Maybe she had spies everywhere who watched him. She was rich. She could afford it.

Daniel shuddered.

No, Johnny spoke gently with love about his mother. He told her things. Cared about her and loved her. Her opinion mattered.

Daniel needed her to like him. Or at least show that they could get there. Away from whatever awkwardness it had been, because if Johnny's mother hated him he'd have no chance. It'd be dead in the water before it even got off the ground.

On Friday Johnny asked him, "What does your mother drink?"

"Drink?" Daniel asked.

"Like alcohol? Or I guess tea or coffee."

"Wine, she likes red wines. And uh coffee."

Johnny nodded. "I'll see you at 6 o'clock on Saturday." Then he walked away.

Daniel thought maybe his mother had the right idea. Johnny was coming to his house. Not to pick him up or drop him off but to sit in the chairs around their table, the way he sat on the floor at Mr. Miyagi's.

He'd be close.

He'd get to see what a real nice Italian dinner was like. Not the fake stuff. The home-cooked mother's food. The stuff Daniel knew how to make. And Daniel *could* make it for Johnny.

Then he remembered his mother was coming as well and Mr. Miyagi and it felt like too many people.

What if it was disappointing? What if his mother put all this work in and Mrs. Lawrence wouldn't eat it because it *wasn't fancy*?

Saturday Daniel thought he'd go mad.

He practiced his breathing. But he kept watching the clock. Kept hovering over his mother until she smacked his hand and told him to go away.

His palms were sweaty.

He'd changed five times.

His mother told him he looked nice in each of them, in the same tone that told him he didn't. She told him to just pick something and he argued back that he'd done this for her the night before when she came out while he was watching TV, trying to pick something nice to wear for the dinner.

She laughed. She put on music while she cooked. She was going above and beyond. Making pasta and sauces from scratch. It was soothing he knew. He'd done it. There was something peaceful about it. Satisfying. It took forever. But he got it.

He messed with his hair. He studied the living room. The kitchen. Wandered around their apartment picking things up and moving them. Then put them back where they'd been.

Mr. Miyagi arrived first. Early. He brought mochi, offered to help. His mother refused the help in that polite way and Daniel talked and talked and talked, too nervous for there to be any point to it, not knowing where he was going with his stories. Grateful that Mr. Miyagi was there. A familiar and warm face.

His mother finished all her prep and dipped into her room to change and set out the antipasto.

The knock on the door came exactly at 6 o'clock.

I could set my clock to him. Ali said in his head and Daniel rushed to the door opening it before his mother could.

Johnny stood on his doorstep, a light green button-up that made his eyes a more impossibly blue, and pale slacks. He looked like he'd stepped off the country club. Next to him was his mother, elegant in a silk-looking blue dress that came off the shoulders. She looked like she'd stepped out of one of his mother's fashion magazines. She had her arm through Johnny's and took off her sunglasses and smiled.

"Good evening Daniel," she said.

"Good evening Mrs. Lawrence," Daniel said stepping out of the way in a hurry.

He felt like a mouse. A mouse who'd just let a cat into his house. She was going to crush his dreams.

He watched her look around as Johnny seemed to wait. When her appraisal seemed to be over he walked with her to Mr. Miyagi and introduced the two. Mr. Miyagi stood and bowed and Daniel saw her bow back, her lips pulled into a warm smile. Then to his mother who had stood as well.

Mrs. Lawrence was still all warm soft smiles, taking his mother's hand in hers and shook it, complimenting the apartment.

She pulled a bag out of her purse and gave it to his mother. His mother looked in and gasped.

There was a sparkle of delight in Mrs. Lawrence's eyes.

"I asked around, I hope they're good. Tried to find the best Italian wines in the Valley."

"Oh, these are great. Thank you! Shall I pop one open? Oh! Mr. Miyagi would you like some wine?" his mother asked.

Mr. Miyagi looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Hai," he said with a nod.

"I'll pour," Daniel offered.

He needed something to do.

He felt like he was drowning.

The smells of the house reminded him of Newark, of home and he wanted to hug Johnny the way he hugged everyone who used to walk through the door at home. But he kept his hands to himself and walked to the kitchen.

He took out three wine glasses and set them on the counter and carefully took the wine bottles from Mrs. Lawrence. He'd never felt like he'd been under such an intense microscope before. She was watching him. Every move he made.

He swallowed. He found the corkscrew and opened the bottles.

His mother was asking Johnny about school.

Daniel had watched his family pour wine before. Heck, he'd poured wine before. His grandparents showed him the proper way. The correct amount. Even though he had a great aunt who argued with them about it, said what was the point of the glass being so big if you didn't fill it to the brim? And he spent most of his life agreeing with her. Until he tried one summer with Louie to drink a glass full and got sick, turning everything purply red.

He tried to stand tall. This was his house, home turf. Wine, pasta, Italian stuff was in his DNA. He couldn't fuck up. His family would disown him.

He gently passed a wine glass to Mrs. Lawrence and he thought he got a glint of approval, a small motion, and his heart soared. He walked the other to Mr. Miyagi who thanked him and watched as his mother clinked her glass gently against Mrs. Lawrence's, and Mr. Miyagi's with a warm "Saluti" and took a sip.

Daniel turned to Johnny.

"What can I get you?"

Johnny was looking at the books his mother had brought with her from Newark, looking at the titles, as the photos on the wall, and he turned.

"Oh, I brought that soda you liked. Jimmy gave me some. Damn, I forgot it in the trunk. I'll be right back," he said and then hurried to the door.

Daniel wanted to stop him. He didn't have to leave. The sodas could wait.

He *just* got there.

Daniel was just adjusting to how nice he looked in his home. How easy he made it look. Like he belonged.

He looked at ease in a way Ali never did in his mother's car. Her shoulders just a little too stiff, her laugh a little on edge.

But then he was gone out the door and down the steps. Daniel could hear his feet on those steps and he curled his fingers into his palm.

It was thoughtful, it was sweet. It made his heart ache.

Daniel made his way to the kitchen and poured glasses of water.

He heard the footsteps of Johnny return as he put the water at each spot. His mother was talking about their trip from Newark, her job. Mrs. Lawrence was listening. Mr. Miyagi was listening. He moved to the door. He could hear Johnny shifting at their doorstep and opened it.

He smiled warmly at Johnny who had two cases of already sweating soda bottles in his hands. He shifted them in his arms and passed one to Daniel and Daniel held it to his chest as he shut the door while Johnny put the rest in their fridge, next to their milk and juice, eggs, and all the other things Johnny had never seen before. Different then his own fridge in the mansion at home, different than the multiple fridges at Jimmy's house or probably at his other friend's homes.

Daniel ran his fingers through the condensation of his drink. It was the Italian drink. The one they'd had on their trip.

He'd remembered.

He twisted off the cap and took his seat between his mother and Mr. Miyagi. Johnny sat down between his own mother and Mr. Miyagi.

It looked right. So absolutely perfect. His mother was right. He'd forgotten how much he missed it. To have people they liked in their home. People they cared for at their table.

Mrs. Lawrence was talking about places nearby she liked. Giving his mother recommendations on places to eat at. Asking if they were still around. Her favorite sandwich shop, a restaurant that gave out day-old bread.

Johnny was studying the antipasto plater, trying the meat and cheese, popping an olive into his mouth, fingers lingering on his lips listening to his mother talk.

After a while Lucile stood up and got the gnocchi. Daniel smiled getting up to help her carry the dishes. They were set out in front of everyone and Daniel sat, watching the way his mother's eyes sparkled. Delighted.

He felt warm. He'd been awful. She'd move them far, and she'd lost as much as he had. Her whole family, her roots. He'd been a brat. She'd

had so much hope in their move. She was probably keeping upbeat the whole way not just to try and win him over but for herself.

His eyes turned to Johnny watching him eat. He seemed to like it.

Mrs. Lawrence was full of compliments for his mother and he felt some of the tension leave. They were getting along.

He ate, it was a familiar recipe, but delicious. Everything she made was delicious.

They were prying conversation out of Mr. Miyagi now, asking him about karate, it was slow but they were working together and he seemed embarrassed by all the attention but indulged in talking about how he'd learned it from his father as his father had learned it from his. He talked about how his karate was for defense only. Both women nodded their approval. They liked this.

The gnocci finished, wine glasses refilled, Daniel helped his mother get the next dish pollo alla 'Ncip 'Nciap with salad and bread.

Johnny looked surprised and Daniel grinned.

"This is delightful Lucille," Mrs. Lawrence said.

She gently elbowed Johnny and smiled at him and he smiled back. There was a look that passed, a look Daniel didn't understand. She looked sad just for an instant and then it was gone.

Daniel got comfortable as they ate, he let his foot slide out and gently pressed it against Johnny's. They hadn't ever really eaten across from one another and he missed having Johnny beside him.

They were talking about classes and Daniel talked about how he was doing, while they ate. He compared California schools with New Jersey, laughing jokingly about feeling a little lost in a sea of tan blondes. His mother looked amused.

"Daniel's been doing rather well in his classes from what his teachers have told me. Which is such a relief. I worried so much last semester."

Daniel's head shot up. "Ma," he hissed.

Johnny had finished eating and he looked suddenly uncomfortable.

"Oh, I'm sure. Between moving and..." Mrs. Lawrence trailed off then her eyes got hard. "Johnny's actions, I'm sure it was very worrisome."

She'd said it.

The air felt cold.

Tense.

Everything he'd worried about was happening.

Mrs. Lawrence's eyes swept over Johnny. "Johnny dear, could you go pick up the other gift?"

Johnny looked at her, searching her eyes for a second before nodding, excusing himself, and quickly heading out the door. Mrs. Lawrence's head tilted slightly, listening to Johnny's retreating footsteps down the steps then.

Her eyes fell on Daniel's mother an eyebrow arched.

"You have something you want to say? Ask?"

Daniel's mother looked startled.

Surprised.

She fiddled with her napkin in her lap and then she sat forward. Daniel wanted to stop her. Didn't know what she was going to say, or ask but didn't want it to happen. Somethings couldn't ever be taken back and he wasn't sure his mother understood that sometimes.

"I worried about Daniel a lot, but he had Mr. Miyagi, a great teacher to watch his back and train him. But I saw Johnny after Kreese tried to kill him when he came to visit and apologize. Aren't you worried? Aren't you- I don't know what I'd do if someone did that to Daniel. Someone I trusted."

The ice melted ever so slightly and Daniel looked between the two of them.

Mr. Miyagi nodded. "Teacher should never harm student. Kreese very bad teacher."

Mrs. Lawrence smiled coldly, all ice. "Don't worry," she said, picking up her piece of bread and running it through the sauce on her plate with perfectly manicured nails. "He will never have any students ever again for as long as I live. I'm taking care of it."

Daniel looked at her in surprise.

"How?" his mother asked leaning forward, curious.

"By telling people the truth. Who wants to send their kids to a man who will attempt to kill them if they fail? I've talked to other parents. I've cornered Johnny's friends. I know all the awful training he put them through that he never told me about. I now understand how he broke his arm in some balancing exercise. I've also talked to the All-Valley Under 18 board. I took every story, every piece of evidence. He's banned. He can't be headteacher for his dojo in the tournament. There's some wiggle room that I can't figure out how to close, Cobra Kai has damn good lawyers. I don't know how, because Kreese doesn't seem to have the means." Her fingers were curled tightly around the wine glass stem. "But I will not allow him to be near students and will destroy anything he tries to do if I hear so much as a peep for as long as I live, for as long as I can. He will go nowhere near my Johnny ever again."

Daniel knew first hand how scary Johnny was when he was pissed, when he held a grudge. He saw now where he got it. But unlike with himself, with the misunderstandings with Johnny, he understood Mrs. Lawrence.

Still, he expected Mr. Miyagi to protest. To say something. To tell her to let it go. About how anger just eats someone up.

She turned suddenly to Mr. Miyagi and took his hands in hers, there were tears in her eyes.

"Thank you for saving him."

"Right thing to do. Johnny-san good boy, just misguided. Wrong Teacher."

Mrs. Lawrence laughed, a watery laugh, and brushed tears from her eyes. "Unlucky," she said softly.

She turned to look at Daniel and he felt trapped.

"I'm sorry he tormented you, hurt you. That boy you met, is not the boy I raised. And I appreciate you letting him apologize, letting him try to make amends."

She fanned at her face, trying to stop more tears from falling. "I told myself I wasn't going to cry at this dinner." She laughed another watery laugh. "Thank you Lucille for inviting us. I wanted to talk to you too. I wanted to meet Mr. Miyagi. It's been so hard, but I'm so

relieved you're doing okay. That you're all doing okay."

Daniel didn't know what she meant but his mother reached out and took her hand in both of hers and smiled. "You're doing your best."

"My best would be not crying so I don't worry Johnny when he gets back," she said picking up her napkin and sniffing and dabbing. "You'll let me know if I failed and look like a raccoon right?"

Daniel's mother laughed. "Of course."

"Did you have anything else you wanted to say? Questions?"

"Just that Johnny is proving himself very reliable. Quite the gentleman."

"That's a relief. To be fair, I'm not surprised he had a streak of anger that hurt someone, hurt Daniel. He buries so much. I know Kreese fanned the flames he'd been burying until it turned into a bonfire. I'm so sorry you became the person he took it out on Daniel. I'm so sorry I didn't notice and stop him earlier. He's just always gotten into fights. But I'm...I'm used to him being in your position, not in the one he found himself in."

"Wait?" his mother said. "Johnny used to get bullied? You're joking. He's so tall and muscular."

"Growth spurt before high school and Kreese's karate regimen," Mrs. Lawrence said shaking her head. "He used to be quite small and thin. Practically every day he came home bloody and bruised. I was sending him to new schools almost every other month hoping to find one where he wouldn't get beaten up. One where he'd finally make friends. So it made it harder to realize how bad Cobra Kai was. Because that's where he found friends. Which led to the school he goes to now, which led to him dating Ali. It gave him confidence in himself, pulled him out of his shell. Which he's just sinking back into now. And I don't blame him. I just wish he'd had a better teacher."

Daniel's eyes went to Mr. Miyagi who was just listening. He opened his mouth to mention that Mr. Miyagi was training Johnny, was teaching him, but then Mr. Miyagi met his eyes and did the subtlest shake of his head.

Daniel didn't understand.

It'd make Mrs. Lawrence overjoyed. He already was doing it. Already

was working on it.

But he hadn't told Johnny yet. Daniel thought Johnny was ready.

He picked up his soda and looked at Mrs. Lawrence and then frowned, maybe he didn't actually know if Johnny was ready, just wanted him to be. It was becoming a habit. A habit of wanting things to go faster, move faster than they were already going, forcing things.

He wanted to spar with Johnny, wanted to practice in Mr. Miyagi's garden together. He wanted Mr. Miyagi to pull back the curtain and tell him he'd been training Johnny everything already. And see the look on Johnny's face.

It was all about Daniel, not Johnny.

He sighed. Mr. Miyagi had his reasons, and he was being selfish.

His mother was speaking gently to Mrs. Lawrence who nodded and was going for her purse. She pulled out her wallet and with a little click was flipping through something and then a photo was sat on the table.

Daniel leaned forward. It was Johnny but it wasn't Johnny. It was a scrawny kid with the same big blue eyes and blonde hair.

"That growth spurt really did things for him," Daniel's mother said and Daniel blushed.

He agreed.

"Oh!" his mother said clapping her hands together delighted and then got up and Daniel felt panic run through him.

Oh fuck no. No no no no. Not the photo albums. They were not doing this. Oh god, he could hear footsteps coming up the steps.

His mother was opening the photo album and setting it down on the table. Mrs. Lawrence was smiling. This was happening.

He wondered if he could run out of the apartment and hide, take Johnny with him.

He had no good excuse.

Johnny wouldn't just leave his mother behind and run away with him.

There was a knock and Daniel went to go get it, thinking he'd just set whatever Johnny had gone to get down on the floor, grab his hand and run.

They could leave the Avanti, leave the Ford. They could run down the streets of Reseda on foot, he could pull Johnny along.

"Welcome back Johnny-san," Mr. Miyagi said opening the door.

Too slow. Damnit.

Johnny was holding a basket. Mrs. Lawrence turned and smiled at him motioning for Johnny to come over. Johnny did so and handed the basket to Daniel's mother who took it with a sound of surprise.

"You already got us wine, this is too much!"

"I didn't get a chance to welcome you to California or the Valley," Mrs. Lawrence said warmly. "Wine is for dinner, this is a welcome to the neighborhood."

Johnny's eyes were on his photo on the table, eyes wide, a light pink on his cheeks. His hand reached for the photo and Mrs. Lawrence smacked his hand away, a gentle smack.

Daniel stifled a laugh.

"It's all local goods. Local beauty company stuff, local fruits, and honey, candies, all my favorites. I hope you like it."

Daniel looked at his mother, her eyes were as wide as saucers, touched. He smiled softly. His mother carried it gently to the coffee table in the living room. "It's wonderful Laura, thank you. I can't wait to try it all."

Mrs. Lawrence smiled, there was a mischievous glint in her eye. "You were saying something about photos?"

"Right!"

Damnit.

The table was cleared and the photo albums were set out.

His mother showed them pictures of Daniel as a kid in Newark. Field trips to New York City. All the cliché tourist spots. Daniel felt his eyes sting. His father had been his chaperone for that one. A photo of the

two of them at the Statue of Liberty. Of him sitting on his father's shoulders while walking around downtown, his Dad pointing things out, at the zoo, at Central Park, walking down Broadway, the Empire State Building. Halloween costumes, hand-made by his grandmother, standing with Louie with big grins on their faces. Talent shows and school plays.

It was a wave of nostalgia for a life Daniel wouldn't ever return to, a time before, a time where they were all together. A big family holiday, everyone crowded in together, sitting between both parents.

His mother was talking, little tidbits behind each photo and Mrs. Lawrence was nodding warmly, listening.

Daniel's eyes fell on Johnny's. His face was soft. Daniel had expected him to be laughing. Laughing at how gangly Daniel had been, to make fun of his homemade costumes, the cake on his face on his birthday. But there wasn't anything dark in his features, just soft.

"Daniel-san, very cute," Mr. Miyagi said warmly.

Daniel blushed darkly. This was his nightmare. Worst nightmare.

Mrs. Lawrence laughed softly. "So cute." She pulled open her wallet again, slipping the photo of Johnny back into its spot and then with a furrowed brow, flipped a couple more times and Johnny's hand went to her arm.

"Mother." He looked horrified.

"I don't have a lot of photos from when he was little," she said softly but then she set one down on the table of Johnny at the carhop they'd gone to. He was sitting on the front of an old beaten-up car holding a swirled ice cream cone, surrounded by the staff, girls in skates, laughing and smiling. "But we were frequent customers when he was little, so they loved him, took a photo on one of our visits, and gave me a copy."

Daniel laughed. "It's almost like school for half of last week. Completely swarmed by girls." And being so utterly confused by it. Overwhelmed. It was the same look. But Johnny at the carhop looked happier. He'd been so small. It didn't match with the boy in front of him. The happy face, the small kid.

"Oh really?" Mrs. Lawrence asked question pointed at Johnny who ducked his head to avoid her eyes.

"The guys took care of it," he said softly.

"That gives me so many more questions," she said with a laugh but she didn't press it even though Daniel wished she did.

His mother was flipping forward, past Dad getting sick, skipping forward into awkward years, where Daniel shot up like a weed, not as tall as Johnny or his giant friends, but still tall, and he stood up suddenly. He didn't want to see himself getting acne for the first time, surrounded by friends despite how he looked, smile wide a complete opposite of how he was now.

"I'll get dessert," Daniel said.

He was dying to know what his mother had made. She'd sent him away while making it and slapped at him every time he'd tried to get a peek. She was amazing at cooking, but her desserts were to die for. Everyone growing up wanted an invite to Daniel's birthday parties because of the food. His mother's handmade cannoli, bombolone, the biscotti, the panna cotta, amaretti, fancy tiramisu, cakes, and tortes.

His mother didn't stop him. She just smiled and nodded. He headed to where she knew she'd hid it.

"Be careful Daniel, it's heavy."

Heavy.

What did she make?

He carefully removed the lid, the etched one specifically picked out so it could be pulled off with a flourish so no one saw what was underneath it until she wanted them to.

Torta setteveli.

His mother had worked hard on it. It was usually a birthday cake, a very intensive one.

He carried it over to the table, setting it carefully in the center and then got plates and forks, a cake server. He handed the cake server to his mother and took his spot, watching her pull the lid off with a flourish.

"Torta setteveli" she said with a grin. "A 7 layer cake."

She was so proud of herself. For his birthday last semester, they'd

gone out for dinner. He told her she worked too hard, shouldn't have to make him anything.

They just went to a restaurant with Ali. She hadn't gotten to make anything and maybe she'd wanted to.

She showed her love through food.

He kept trying not to be a bother to her, to not worry her, and she'd tried to meet him where he was. But this was clearly what she'd been wanting all along. To open their home to people and share, even if it wasn't much, it was still a lot. Full of love, full of warmth, welcoming.

He'd been so worried she'd say something mean to Mrs. Lawrence, or Johnny. And maybe she would've, before. Before she'd taken one look at Johnny and decided "that boy needs a homecooked meal."

It's what she'd said when he came home after Johnny apologized. He'd been so upset, Mr. Miyagi seemed to have forgiven him so easily and when he'd learned Johnny had also been in his apartment, knew where he lived it riled up all the panic again. Johnny Lawrence, alone in his apartment with his mother who might be an Italian mother from Jersey, but Johnny was a bully, practically a gang leader. But she'd just been cleaning up tea and told Daniel, "that boy needs a homecooked meal." Daniel thought she'd lost it. She'd seen him kick Daniel's leg out from under him. The way they fought. The bruises and scrapes and his destroyed bike.

It became a theme. A seed she wouldn't let go of and now she'd gotten what she wanted. A full Italian dinner. Nice wine, nice company, her cooking that never disappointed.

She was cutting through the cake with a big smile on her face, passing it out.

"So," Mrs. Lawrence said. "Lucille, what's all of this?"

His mother held up a slice, delighted to be asked, excited to explain. "At the bottom, we have chocolate sponge cake, then a praline crunch, hazelnut Bavarian cream, more sponge cake, more cream, chocolate mousse, and then a chocolate glaze."

Daniel's eyes roamed around the table.

He had a feeling it would be too sweet for Mr. Miyagi, but the man dug in and nodded his approval and drank a lot of water.

Johnny was staring at his slice, counting the layers, eyes wide.

Daniel grinned. Bobby wasn't the only one whose family could bake.

Mrs. Lawrence was heaping compliments on his mother, and she was practically glowing. She'd needed this. She'd needed someone to talk to that wasn't someone she worked with or the lady who sat by the pool with her dog. She needed a friend. Daniel didn't know how he felt about that friend being Mrs. Lawrence of all people. But if they got along maybe it'd make things easier. He could take the two of them and pull them into his family. They could be in-laws.

He forced his eyes down on his plate. What the hell? He hadn't made a move and was already thinking twenty steps ahead. Most people didn't make sure their Mom's got along before pursuing a romantic relationship with one another. Absolutely ridiculous. What was wrong with him?

Johnny took a bite and looked like he liked it. Just the smallest spark of emotion. So different from his mother yet the same.

Daniel's eyes kept going back to him. He had chocolate on his face. He probably tasted like cake now. His mouth would be warm, wet, soft. Daniel chewed on the straw he'd stuck in his drink. Then sat up suddenly, shaking his head.

He focused on the conversation happening around him.

More wine had been poured and they had pulled Mr. Miyagi into the conversation again. He'd gotten the mochi out and was explaining how it was made. He was talking about traditions and everyone was listening and Daniel's eyes slid back to Johnny.

He'd cleaned up the chocolate and Daniel was disappointed. He was listening quietly to Mr. Miyagi, soaking up every word he said like a sponge. He blinked and his head turned slowly, eyes dragging away from Mr. Miyagi and every so slowly to Daniel. There wasn't an expression there. Just waiting. Daniel had been caught staring, but he couldn't look away. He couldn't avert his eyes. It was like a challenge.

If he looked away first then what? He'd have to admit that he'd been staring? Taking in the lock of blonde hair that had curled away from the rest, all rebellious like. How the top button of his green shirt was unbuttoned and Daniel was trying to remember if he'd come in with that button unbuttoned, or if at some point he'd done it when Daniel hadn't noticed until right then. Drawing Daniel's eyes to his clavicle,

his collarbone, that little dip he wanted to kiss. Wondering if the first button was unbuttoned if it was possible that Johnny might unbutton another throughout the night.

He worried it'd all be on his face, with Johnny looking at him. That he'd read it in his eyes. That Daniel didn't want Johnny to leave, or if he did leave he wanted to go with him. He wanted to find someplace secluded and help Johnny out of his shirt. To kiss him until he was breathless.

Chapter End Notes

> Lots of food in this chapter. I don't want to spam everyone with food links. So I'll just share like photos of the food mentioned on tumblr. At least one website said the Torta Setteveli was invented in the 90's...but we're going to just ignore that.

Soothing chaos

Chapter Summary

> Mentions of past animal abuse/cruelty. Pulled something from the TV show. I figure Kreese always has used the same awful tactics.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sitting at Daniel's table with his mother and Mr. Miyagi was not something Johnny had expected to happen. He knew his mother had wanted something like this. Told him she wanted to talk to them privately, gave him errands in case she saw an opening. Different words and phrasing he memorized, the way he had when he was little.

If she said one phrase, he'd say he forgot something and would go sit in the Avanti for twenty minutes. If she asked him to do something else, he'd go pick up the welcome basket she'd had made. If she put her hand on his and squeezed it hard twice, then he'd feign an upset stomach and they'd bolt.

They'd worked it out when he was little, perfected it by the time she married Sid and now it was old hat. But the atmosphere wasn't tense.

She seemed to be having a genuinely good time and it was nice. The food was good and Mr. Miyagi kept talking warmly about things in his life and it was pleasant to hear him talk. To hear his stories.

He felt Daniel's eyes on him and turned. He didn't know what Daniel wanted. A fight maybe? He wondered what he'd done this time. Was it because he was in his house? He'd never been there that long before. Maybe it was setting off alarms. Old warnings of danger. He didn't know how to make himself seem less of a threat. He'd been trying.

Daniel wasn't looking away. Brown eyes boring into him. He didn't know what to do, felt uncomfortable. He thought everything was going well. Decent at least. His mother's arm was on the back of his chair, listening to Mr. Miyagi.

Daniel wasn't blinking. Was this a staring contest? Who did staring contests anymore? Would he set Daniel off if he won? Piss him off again? What would happen if he looked away?

"Flirting?" his mother whispered quietly in his ear and he startled, turning bright red.

She laughed softly.

He ducked his head. He couldn't believe she'd said that. Not that it'd been loud enough for anyone else to hear. But still. He glanced up at her. She was all bright smiles.

"I like them," she whispered again. "Wish we'd found them sooner, huh?"

She was a couple of glasses in the wine she'd spent hours picking out. Something Italian, something expensive, but tasty. The sommelier had been so patient when he'd gone with her as she worked her way through the drinks.

Now it was hitting her. She was buzzed. But he knew what she meant. This could've been them in another world. If they'd been lucky. They too could've had a warm home, with warm friends and laughter at their dining table instead of whatever it was at Sid's table that was big but only ever had the three of them at it, or was crammed packed with people who really just wanted something from Sid.

He also knew from the way her hand was on his wrist, squeezing it ever so gently that she was taking this all in, everything it meant and she was planning. The wheels in her head were turning. What could she do to make this better? If she liked them so much after one dinner, how could she express that and keep it going?

He smiled softly looking at her, it was the look in her eyes she got. She was weaving her lie. The lie she'd tell Sid. How she'd made a cool new friend, a lady, of course. But she'd lie about where Mrs. LaRusso lived. And she'd make her seem more important. And he'd give his blessing, not that his mother would really need it.

She was planning coffee dates, she was planning PTA events, invites to the country club for lobster night. This was going to become a thing. Her eyes flickered to Johnny and she gave him a warm smile. He patted her hand. She needed a friend who understood. A friend who wasn't just interested in her because of who she'd married when she was drowning. Maybe this would be okay.

He just feared that maybe after two many drinks she'd start trying to be a wingman. He didn't need any more of those. The guys were bad enough. He didn't need her floating out ideas, seeing if Mrs. LaRusso

knew things. They'd have to make boundaries. He wasn't looking forward to that conversation.

Mother, promise me you won't ask her if Daniel would date a guy. Promise me you won't try to test the waters to see if she'd be okay with it. I'm happy being friends.

But he knew when she had an idea she'd run with it and she was practically impossible to stop. Thankfully she'd been busy with something she wouldn't talk about lately. Something that required talking to city hall and trying to hunt down the mayor and with lawyers and whatnot. Too busy to try and interfere with Johnny's love life or lack of a love life.

He figured they'd get through this year and then go their separate ways, hopefully, friends, but at least no longer as badly damaged as they were before and that would be good enough.

Daniel would go on to better and greater things and Johnny would go for a drive.

He was starting to think of disappearing into the woods. His mother wouldn't like that. But there were so many mountain ranges. Some, he'd seen, liked having forest rangers who just lived in the wild for most of the year. He thought maybe that'd be good for him.

He'd take the bonsai and just live off the land.

He'd be out of reach of Sid, and he'd be somewhere where Kreese could never find him. Maybe. Kreese knew tracking. Kreese knew how to hunt people down in the wild. Some leftover war stuff.

But if Johnny didn't tell anyone where he was going. He could be fine. Maybe he'd grow a beard. Come back to see his mom from time to time, to visit Mr. Miyagi, help him with stuff, and then go back to the woods.

Dinner wrapped up. Mr. Miyagi bade everyone goodnight first, saying he had to go do something in his workshop.

Johnny scrambled to stand.

Mr. Miyagi bowed to his mother. His mother, delighted, bowed back.

"See Johnny-san tomorrow, home 6 am?" Mr. Miyagi asked a small warm smile on his face.

"Sure, of course," Johnny said.

His mother put away her photos and looked at the time, realizing they should go home soon too. Sid was probably still on set. Would be again for about a week. But the staff would still talk. His mother hugged Mrs. LaRusso.

"Thank you for having us," Johnny said.

"Oh our pleasure," Mrs. LaRusso said with a warm big smile. "We'll have to do this again."

"Oh yes, please! Here let me give you the number to my office," his mother said, writing it down on a piece of paper and handing it directly to Mrs. LaRusso. "Maybe I can show you around California a bit, we can visit my old haunts in Reseda. I'm curious what's still around."

Johnny smiled softly following his mother down the stairs, arms held out, ready to catch her if she stumbled on the steps. At the bottom of the stairs, he felt eyes on him, burning into him. He turned and looked back.

Daniel was standing alone in the doorway watching him. His eyes were too intense. He didn't know what he'd done wrong this time. But he'd try to diffuse it.

He waved a small wave. "Goodnight Daniel," he called.

Daniel stiffened and disappeared back into the apartment suddenly and Johnny frowned. Apparently, that hadn't been the right thing to do. He followed his mother, concerned she'd roll her ankle in her high heels and slide into the empty pool.

The door opened again. He looked back, wondering if they'd forgotten something.

"Goodnight," Daniel called quickly and the door shut again.

His mother started laughing.

Johnny hurried back to her, wondering how much she'd been drinking. He went to take her arm in his but she swatted him away, stumbling a little, still giggling until she made it to his Avanti, slipping in with a sigh. She ran her hand through her hair and then stretched out her arms with a little shout. "That was fun! You know I had my

doubts," she said turning to him as he slid into the driver's seat and turned on the car. "I like them and you know," she said tapping him low on his shoulder near his elbow, her voice low. "Daniel couldn't keep his eyes off of you."

"*Mom,"* he stressed it. "He's still getting used to me not beating him up anymore. Please don't start...whatever it is you're doing in your head."

"Wedding invitations," she said with a giggle of delight. "I think Lucielle and I could put together the nicest wedding for you two."

"*Mom!"*

"What? Oh, right it's not called a wedding right? Stupid laws. They'll change someday, just you wait," she said tapping away to the music playing on the radio.

Johnny's ears were burning. This was what he didn't want to happen. For her to get carried away.

"I'm thinking on the beach," she said. "*Oh* maybe somewhere in Europe. I've been hearing whisperings about Denmark. They might be the first to recognize unions. How do you feel about Denmark?"

"Mom!" Johnny said.

She turned. "Are you going to make a move Johnny, honey? His relationship with Ali *is* over right?"

Johnny relaxed his grip on the steering wheel. His knuckles had been white. Shoulders practically up to his ears.

"We need to make some boundaries," he said cautiously.

It felt weird. But the book he'd checked out from the library said boundaries were healthy. Helped. Like meditation, and breathing, and all the stuff Mr. Miyagi was having him do.

She was turning, curling up in the seat next to him, fingers reaching out to brush the hair from his forehead and trying to tuck the one stubborn lock that refused to stay down no matter how many hours he'd fought with it earlier. She was listening, waiting.

"I'm not ready," he breathed. "For all of this again."

She was still quiet.

He continued. "I know you like the LaRusso's. I know hanging out with Mrs. LaRusso would probably be real nice. But can you please not try and move pieces around like a chessboard? It's...it's my life. And I don't want...I'm trying *very hard* to not scare him off. I'm trying very hard to *just* be friends. We just made it to friends Mom. *Friends*. I didn't think we'd ever get there. I didn't think he'd ever want to be my friend. Not after everything I've done. Yes. I like him. I like him a lot. But Mom, please, please don't start scheming, not this. Let me just...enjoy being around him, in his presence. He's letting me be there and it might not last, things like this don't usually last for me. I mean Ali didn't. And you got all your hopes up with her. Like this. You and the Mills and Sid, started planning our wedding. And I just can't do that again. I can't..."

He stopped, blinking rapidly, tears running down his cheeks.

"I know it wouldn't be the same, it *can't* be the same, but I need you to just be there to listen and support, and not try and take over, to not scheme. Not this time. Can you, please promise me you'll let me just enjoy the small moments? Without extrapolating them to mean deeper things? I can't handle you telling me that there's more meaning to things that aren't there. Not again. You were so sure about Ali and I believed it too and..."

He swallowed hard and rubbed quickly at his face as the light turned. His voice dropped, becoming low.

"Please just have fun, enjoy hanging out with Mrs. LaRusso as I know you want to, but don't bring me into it. Just be...like a normal mom. Not one trying to matchmake. Don't view this as some secret spy work. I don't need to know. I don't want to know. I'm happy the way things are."

He didn't know if she'd believe him, not with tears running down his face. He sniffed. Let out a groan at the next red light and scrubbed at his face.

"Okay," she said softly next to him.

He looked over. Her face was serious, her pinky was held out towards him.

"Really?"

"Yes," she said.

He curled his pinky against hers and they shook on it.

"Think Daniel can cook as good as his mom?" she asked.

He laughed, it was watery. "From what I've seen, yes."

"Who knew beans worked in a desert? Rice and beans. That's what mochi is," she said with a sigh. "It works. And now I'm going to want more of it and where am I going to find it? Am I going to have to find Mr. Miyagi every time I get a craving and beg him to introduce me to his friends so I can get a mochi fix?"

Johnny laughed. "Maybe don't go rushing to do that. Knowing you you'll find somewhere that sells it."

"Hey," she said.

He glanced at her again.

"I know you're trying hard. I see you. I'm proud. You know that right? That I'm proud of you?"

He blinked back more tears and smiled, softly. "I know Mom."

She smiled. "Good."

The song changed and she drummed the dashboard with her hands, singing along, at the top of her lung. She elbowed him. It took him a while. It felt like old times, the roles reversed. Him sitting in the passenger seat, singing along to the radio with her. It took him a moment. A deep breath. He sang along with her softly and she grinned, dancing in her seat, hands raised to enjoy the roof down and the wind through her fingers.

Some things would never change and he took comfort in it. No matter what happened to them, there would be moments where they came back. Rich or poor, living in a shitty apartment a mansion, or in their car, they'd always have each other and moments like these.

Johnny drove himself to Mr. Miyagi's at 6 am. Mr. Miyagi was carrying coolers to his truck and Johnny quickly parked the Avanti and rushed out to help.

"Ah, good morning Johnny-san," Mr. Miyagi said as Johnny hurried to grab the next cooler and put it into the truck.

The weight was weird. Whatever was in it moved, sloshed around.

"Good morning, Mr. Miyagi."

"We put all in truck and go."

"Okay."

Johnny picked up cooler after cooler. He didn't think he knew anyone with more coolers than the guys, but soon Mr. Miyagi's back of the trunk was full. He closed the truck bed and there was a sloshing sound again. He was curious but wouldn't ask. Mr. Miyagi always shared what he wanted anyone to know and Johnny would respect his privacy.

"Johnny-san drive."

Johnny took the proffered keys and hopped into the cab. Mr. Miyagi sat on the other side.

"Where to?" Johnny asked turning the truck on and carefully pulling out of the lot.

He glanced back at the coolers. He didn't want them sliding around. He didn't trust they wouldn't break open. He listened to the address and directions Mr. Miyagi gave him and drove carefully.

"Johnny-san have allergies?"

"No."

Mr. Miyagi sank into silence for a while, watching the quiet early morning roads. It was a quiet trip. Johnny moving the truck nervously. Eyes jumping to the rearview mirror every time he stopped a little too fast and at every bump.

"We visit friend," Mr. Miyagi said after a while. "Help friend today."

Johnny nodded.

"Been too long since Miyagi saw friend."

It took a while with how slow Johnny was driving, how cautious. When they pulled into the drive he had to pry his fingers off the steering wheel. He'd been holding on too tightly. But he quickly jumped out and went to the trunk to be told what to do with the coolers, then paused reading the sign.

Animal Sanctuary.

He looked at Mr. Miyagi.

"Sometimes important to know every life precious, yes? Not just people. But animals too. Even bug. Miyagi play game with chopsticks, try to catch fly. Pesky fly. Game of concentration and skill. But Miyagi never hurt fly. Goal to catch, just to know can do it. Then let go and never again. Today help other things that need help. Bring cooler."

Johnny grabbed one of the coolers and followed Mr. Miyagi up to the front door where he knocked and went through.

A woman directed him on where to put the coolers, Johnny left her to catch up with Mr. Miyagi and worked on carrying things from the back of the truck.

His chest was tight.

He'd watched Mr. Miyagi catch a spider and ever so carefully move it outside. Any bug he saw Mr. Miyagi moved it. The opposite of Kreese again. He remembered the mouse Kreese had given him. The panic at being given something living that he had to care for, unsure what would happen when Sid found out. It'd been brown. A field mouse. He'd puzzled why Kreese had given them mice but no containers, no supplies to care for it. And then the lesson became clear. When he rolled out a snake. The glass case had been covered in a black sheet and he'd yanked it off with a big flourish.

"What happens in the real world boys? To the weak and helpless?"

Kreese had taken the mouse from him before he could act.

Johnny had felt sick. The guys didn't talk about it after. It should've been their first clue. The first warning sign to get out. But Johnny was still at a different school at that point. And he'd been desperate to stay with them. Desperate to see them.

So he didn't tell anyone.

Didn't tell his mother, how small the mouse had felt in his hands. How much it seemed to trust him and the panic knowing that he couldn't do anything for it. He couldn't take it home and save it, Sid would never allow it. He couldn't stop Kreese. He hadn't acted fast enough, hadn't been able to come up with a plan, and then it'd been over.

He moved the coolers back and forth until the back of the truck was empty.

"Johnny right?" she asked. "Welcome to our sanctuary, I'm Maisy, nice to meet you. Mr. Miyagi said you'd help out today?"

"Uh, yes," Johnny said.

"Awesome. Follow me."

Johnny followed her down a dark hallway into a large room. "We need someone to hold these little guys while we clean. They need to stay warm."

Before Johnny knew what was happening the tiniest kittens he'd ever seen were placed in his hands. They squeaked and cried and he held them to his chest looking down horrified.

They were too small, too fragile.

His hands were too big. S

he cleaned out the kitten's container, adjusting the heat source, and then took them back. Gently placing them back into the container with a small laugh.

"You'll get used to it," she said. "Next one."

More kittens were placed in his hands. And he stood stiffly taking them. Their little claws sunk into his shirt as they cried. It was too much.

What if he dropped them?

What if he hurt them?

It became a rotation. She took the kittens out, put them in his arms, he stood there frozen while she cleaned, and then she took them back. When they were done she smiled at him and motioned for him to sit in a chair. She handed him the smallest bottle he'd ever seen and picked out a kitten and put it in his hands. She showed him how to hold it, how to hold the bottle up, how to feed it. Asked him to feed them all and showed him where the bottles were.

It took awhile, but Johnny relaxed.

Maisy had left him alone.

So it was just him and tiny kittens.

Impossibly small. They were soft and warm and clung little clawed paws to his fingers.

They couldn't really even open their eyes.

Maisy said they couldn't even regulate their own body temperature. Which was why all the containers were heated.

Their fur was so soft.

It was chaotic but peaceful. Trying to carefully reach into a new container to pull out a kitten and keep its friends off of it, from crawling out. Like herding cats was something he'd heard somewhere and he let out a soft laugh. *This* is what they meant. The absolute chaos of trying to stay organized around a bunch of cats. An impossible task.

He spoke softly to them, trying to be soothing. Reading the names on the containers.

"So which of you is Peanut and which of you is Butter, and uh what's this? Sir Mittens the fifth of the Royal court of Victoria?" he snickered. "You, you must be sir Mittens the fifth of the Royal Court of Victoria. You have a tiny mustache and white front paws."

He scooped out the kitten and held it gently the way Maisy had shown him, feeding Sir Mittens, then deciding that Peanut had to be the orange-brown kitten and Butter had to be the white one. He spoke quietly, whispering hello as he fed each one as they ate.

"Sir Mittens, that is atrocious table manners," he said, cleaning up the milk sticking to the kitten's fur.

Silly cat names. He liked that. One day if he ever lived somewhere safe enough, where he could care for something living and mobile he'd give it a ridiculously long title name and then a nickname.

He worked a rhythm, meeting new kittens, assuming which one was which, hoping he got it right, holding them ever so carefully and after a while, when his arms began to ache he was done. He stretched, double-checked he'd fed them all, and then popped his head out to try and find Maisy and tell her he was done.

He wandered down the halls, looking in the windows as he went. A

room full of older kittens playing, a room of adult cats sleeping in sunlight. Puppies playing in another room. Dogs chasing each other and playing in the next.

"Oh good Johnny, done feeding the kittens?" Maisy asked. She shoved something soft into Johnny's hands and he took it. "Oreo escaped again. We got to put her back. Drives the cats and dogs nuts."

Johnny looked down at the white-furred creature in his hands, the long black ears lifting up and listening before round black eyes looked up at him. A bunny.

Johnny didn't think he'd ever seen a bunny up close, let alone held one before. It was impossibly soft.

He could feel the muscles coiling.

"Maisy?" Johnny asked, panic creeping into his voice. Oreo was going to try and run.

Maisy turned.

The rabbit kicked and darted out of his arms, landing with a jump on the floor and then bolting.

"You'll have to catch her. Meet me outside with her."

She turned and pushed the door going outside.

Johnny watched the door shut, turning to look at the rabbit with a sinking feeling. This was how "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" started and that was not what Johnny needed.

He couldn't handle any more strangeness. Any more people calling for his head.

He clicked his tongue, crouching down, calling to Oreo.

Oreo's ear twitched but hopped off and Johnny sighed. He'd have to give chase. He darted after her, down the hall, skidding as she turned the corner, he jumped to try and catch her and missed, having to catch himself and curl back onto his feet before he landed flat on his stomach like some silly cartoon character.

He thought maybe the sound of his footsteps scared her so he walked slowly, the quiet way, on the balls of his feet, soft movements so he wouldn't be heard. He'd perfected it in the mansion. Where he was

expected to not be seen or heard. But her ears were too good. Even at his quietest she still knew he was coming.

She wasn't hopping as fast though. Just curiously hopping around, little nose twitching.

He cornered her and crouched down to scoop her up.

She jumped, feet landing on his head for a moment before vaulting over him and heading back the way they'd just come.

He let out a groan and sunk to the ground. He was being led around by a bunny.

He flopped onto his back. He was exhausted.

He didn't want to hurt the bunny so he kept hesitating.

Kreese would've chewed him out.

He watched her hopping around the hallway curiously. He rolled over onto his stomach, watching her.

Food usually was a good motivator. He wondered if she was looking for something to eat. He looked around, saw a sign that said kitchen, and stood up, dusted himself off, and went in.

There were bins everywhere, labeled for different animals, different names. He saw a collection of vegetables in the rabbit section. He picked up a lettuce leaf and then head back out to the hallway.

Oreo was sitting in the middle of the hall, at the other end and Johnny carefully shut the door behind him. He held up the lettuce leaf, wondering why he felt like he was in the wild west about ready to get into a fight at high noon.

He walked slowly, carefully about halfway, and then sat down, and held out the leaf.

"Oreo, hey Oreo, pretty sure you know you're not supposed to be in here. How about we have a treat? Do you like lettuce? I'll give you a treat and then we can go outside and you can go back to where you're supposed to be. Hmm? How's that sound?"

Oreo moved and Johnny didn't dare move. He didn't dare breathe. She hopped the rest of the way and bit on the leaf and tugged, trying to tug the whole piece out of his hand.

"Hey now," he said relieved he'd kept a good grip on it, or else she'd have the leaf and would be hopping away and that'd be Johnny's luck.

He reached out with his free hand and scooped her up. She didn't seem to notice, focused on the leaf.

He stood and ran. There was no way he was doing it again. He pushed the door open with his hip and was outside into the bright morning light and heat and Maisy was standing on a fence feeding a cow. She heard the door and turned and laughed, taking off her hat and waving it.

"The hutch is over there!" she called pointing.

Johnny held the bunny carefully to his chest. He opened the hutch and slowly set the bunny in. Oreo didn't seem to care now that she had a snack.

He studied the hutch, latched it. He couldn't see how she got out. He stepped back slowly then turned to hurry to Maisy.

"She had you running in circles huh?" Maisy asked with a laugh. "Glad I'm not the only one."

"Here," she took Johnny's hand and put it gently on the cow's forehead,."This is Daisy, she's an old dairy cow."

"You have a lot of animals," Johnny said.

Maisy stuck her hands in her overalls and grinned. "Used to be a big farm. Family raised all sorts of things. Had lots of extra space so figured why not take in animals that no one else wanted? Ended up marrying a vet and thus all the cats and dogs and well all of that," she said with a grin. "We just can't help ourselves. We see something hurt and gotta help it. Its human nature you know?"

Johnny wanted to say he did. But it felt insincere. After a semester of hurting Daniel. After all the years of people hurting him. He doubted it really was human nature. Human nature seemed cruel, dark, twisted. It always hurt him. If human nature helped people who needed help then their landlord wouldn't have kicked them out. The kids at school would've stopped the first time they drew blood. He would've been able to stop himself on Halloween, or long before.

"You know what sets humans apart from a lot of other animals?" Maisy asked turning back to Daisy.

When he didn't respond she continued.

"When archeologists dig up bones and what not they've found all sorts of things. They've found mended bones. They found bones that show the history of people caring for them despite dying, keeping them safe long enough for it to be marked in the bones, like how the life of a tree can be found in its rings. People whose bones were damaged showed the hard lives they lived and yet they continued to live. An animal gets injured and other animals don't help out all the time, it's rare. But humans, we stand out because we have compassion. We care about people and we will protect them. Our friends, our family, our community. There's violence in the world, yes. Tragedy, evil, terrible horrible things, cruelty, but if you look close, somewhere nearby the violence are doctors and firefighters, average people rushing in to help, to pull people from the wreckage. There are strangers, giving aid. Not just to each other, but to animals as well. Almost all of our animals are rescues at this point."

She sighed and pushed back away from the gate and hopped down. Then looked at Johnny.

"I'm not going to keep you around working you to the bone. But you ever get bored, you ever want to come out, you're more than welcome. We can always use volunteers. And not just because you helped Mr. Miyagi carry all the fish my husband asked for his testing."

She grinned. Walking towards the building again. "We like to test and see how the water is doing in different parts around the city, and one of the best ways to tell is by checking on the health of the things that live in there. Mr. Miyagi helps sometimes. Him and the other fishermen."

Daniel followed her back to the front where Mr. Miyagi was standing talking to a man.

"Thanks for letting us borrow him for a bit. It was nice to have someone else feed the kittens and chase after Oreo."

"Of course Maisy-san," Mr. Miyagi said with a smile.

Johnny followed Mr. Miyagi to the truck. He was lost in thought. He knew that places like this existed. But he hadn't realized they existed. It was one of those things in the back of his head.

She had so much hope for the world.

Johnny realized he barely had any.

"They're nice," Johnny said softly.

"Hmm."

"I didn't know cats got that small."

Mr. Miyagi laughed softly. "Very small."

Johnny flexed his fingers around the steering wheel. He hadn't ever held anything that trusted him so much, not since the mouse.

They had been so small. So helpless and they trusted him. They didn't know any better. Didn't know what he was capable of. What he'd done.

The bunny, she might've known, might've read it in his stance when he tried to catch her, slipping away at the last second every time. It had been frustrating, infuriating.

But he'd caught her, put her back, without hurting her.

"Mr. Miyagi?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you think I can get better? Be better?" Johnny asked.

He tried to keep the desperation out of his voice. He meant a million things, but he couldn't voice them. He couldn't explain it, he needed Mr. Miyagi to understand, without the details, without showing the depths of all the wounds. *Can I be compassionate? Can I help others? Can I be someone like them? Someone trustworthy and kind?*

"Johnny-san changing."

"What if I fail?" His throat felt tight. His chest hurt. *What if I hurt someone again?*

"Then Johnny-san try again."

"If I can't?" he whispered. *What if I can't change, what if I can't get better? What if everyone is right? Sid? Kreese? Ali?*

"Johnny-san will. And when can't. Johnny-san ask for help. Help always here."

Johnny glanced over. Mr. Miyagi was patting his own chest, a warm smile on his face. Johnny took in a deep breath.

"Thank you Mr. Miyagi."

Silence fell in the truck as Johnny pulled into the space next to all of Mr. Miyagi's other cars.

"Johnny-san, movie tonight with Daniel-san and friends right?"

"Oh, uh, yes?" Johnny said.

"Good. Johnny-san have fun. Busy morning."

Johnny followed him out of the truck.

"Did you need help with anything else?"

Mr. Miyagi looked thoughtful. "No. Go enjoy day."

"Okay, Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said turning towards his Avanti. His bonsai.

Mr. Miyagi smiled softly looking at the tree in his passenger seat and nodded to himself walking off to his house.

Johnny didn't know what to do with himself until they were supposed to meet for the movie. He went home since Sid wasn't home. He showered, changed. He called Bobby and asked what time they were meeting and then looked through the books on his desk for Daniel's number, sinking into his chair. Hair dripping. He called.

"Hello?" it was Mrs. LaRusso.

"It's Johnny, Mrs. LaRusso. Is Daniel there?"

"Oh, good afternoon Johnny, yeah, he's around here somewhere. One moment."

Johnny waited, listening to her talking to Daniel in the background. The sound of the TV. Then suddenly the sound of the receiver being picked up and a breathless "Johnny?" Dutch was right everything Daniel did was like pure torture. His heart sped up. It was nothing. It had to be nothing.

"I'm not sure if the guys hammered out the plans, but I called to double-check. Did you want to go with us to the movies? I will try to

get Dutch to behave."

That was like promising someone the moon. There was something about getting Dutch in someplace dark. He went wild. He couldn't keep still. He couldn't keep his eyes on the film half the time. He wanted to whisper through it. Wanted to throw popcorn or candy.

He used the fact it led to him getting Ali as an excuse every time they chewed him out for it.

A shrug and his hands up. "Hey, I got at least one of you laid with my antics, why would you wanna stop me? Just cockblocking yourselves at this point."

He didn't seem to realize what a pain in the ass it was to sit next to him, his legs bouncing like something had to be moving. He was better in class, better almost anywhere else. But the damn movies and Johnny felt like he was babysitting a toddler hopped up on sugar.

He didn't know if Daniel understood what that meant. Him trying to get Dutch to behave. But Daniel laughed and it sent a shiver through him. The sound of it in his ear. Amused, happy.

"Good luck with that," Daniel said. "Maybe we could sit on the end?" His voice was low.

In case he needed to run. Johnny got that.

"Okay. Do you want me to come pick you up?"

"Not carpooling with everyone?"

Johnny could practically hear his smile.

"No, I mean. They might be, but no one's going to want to do the van again...if that's okay."

"What time is the show?"

"8 o'clock. It's about an hour and a half film."

"How about..." Daniel said slowly, voice low again, thick like syrup. "I pick you up, say... at 6? I buy you dinner and then we meet them there?"

Johnny remembered Daniel saying his mother wanted him to buy him lunch. There hadn't been a time to follow through. She was probably

still pressing it.

"Okay. Sure," Johnny said looking at the clock. He was glad he'd already showered. "Uh, just honk when you get here. I'll come out and meet you."

It was weird. Johnny was pretty sure he'd never been in the Ford. The banana boat. He wondered what it looked like on the inside, how Daniel drove it.

"See you then," Daniel said, and then there was a click.

Johnny looked at his bonsai. He couldn't take it. But Sid wasn't supposed to be home for a week.

He'd still take precautions.

He locked his door then walked to the window.

He had an hour. He had everything he needed on him. He slid open the window and pushed up the screen and slid one leg out, ducked at his waist and carefully curled his head to his chest, and slowly shifted until his head was on the other side. He put his feet on the roof and slid out of the window, letting the screen fall shut. He walked across the roof.

His mother's office window was always open. He pushed the window up, the screen, and slipped in.

She wasn't in. But her album was out. The photo album she'd started when she married Sid.

He walked out into the hall, found her in the kitchen, staring in the fridge with a frown.

"Trying to think of what you're going to eat?" Johnny asked.

When Sid wasn't around she liked to try and cook for herself. Liked to cook for him. Not always, but sometimes.

"Yeah. I want a snack. But I don't know what I want. Oh look at you, you look nice. Going out?" she asked leaning her head on the edge of the fridge door on top of her hand.

"Yes. In about an hour."

"Okay then help me decide. Do I want popcorn, pop tarts, pizza rolls,

or chips?"

"We have pizza rolls?" Johnny asked leaning over the door to look in.

"Snuck 'em," she said with a grin.

"You *gotta* eat those."

"Want some before you go?" she asked pulling the bag out of the freezer.

"Probably shouldn't. We're grabbing dinner."

"Nice, where?"

"I don't know."

She finished cooking them in the microwave and sunk down into her chair.

He sat next to her. It was the best place to wait. He'd be out of the way of the staff, but close enough to the door to listen.

"Who's picking you up?"

"Daniel."

"Oh?"

"Don't Oh, me. We agreed, remember? You pinky promised."

"An oh is just an oh. What's he drive?"

Johnny smiled. " A yellow 1947 Ford Super De Luxe."

"Yellow?"

"Yeah."

"Nice car."

"It is."

"Lots of room," she said raising an eyebrow.

"I don't want to know what you're trying to say but I want you to stop."

"Do you have everything you need? Money, your ID, condoms?"

"Mom! You promised you'd behave!"

She laughed, it was like a cackle that spread through the kitchen.

"I'm sorry honey. You don't know how much I'm holding back. How hard this is."

"Rein it in. Asap," Johnny said sourly.

"Okay, okay."

She popped a pizza roll in her mouth, then started waving at her mouth looking around for a glass of water.

Johnny got up and poured her a glass. "Serves you right. Instant karma."

"Cruel," she said taking the water and downing it.

A horn honked and Johnny glanced at the clock. He was early. He looked at his mother. She tapped her cheek, dabbing at her lips with a napkin. He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

"Be good Johnny, be safe."

"I will. Maybe cut those so they don't burn you. Let out the heat."

"My smart boy."

Johnny worried it wasn't Daniel, but no one else had a yellow Ford.

He hurried down the steps and towards the car, wanting to avoid his mother following and embarrassing him further, or the staff. He pulled open the passenger side door and hopped in. Daniel smiled at him, pulling away from the mansion.

"You know it's dangerous running into strange cars. You shouldn't just blindly hop in. Never know who it is. Could be a creep," Daniel said.

"You're the only person I know who has a yellow car," Johnny said. Daniel had that playful tone, the look in his eye. "Unless you're saying *you're* dangerous?"

Daniel grinned at that. "I might just be."

Johnny smirked. A guy kicks you in the face, sucker punches you a couple of times. Believes he's dangerous. He was getting full of himself. Daniel was as dangerous as a group of kittens. Just chaotic.

"So...Ma really liked having you guys over. Wants to do it again. Both of you or...just you, whenever you're free."

"What about you?" Johnny asked.

Daniel glanced at him. "Huh?"

Johnny tried to think carefully on how to ask, it felt like walking through a minefield trying to talk to Daniel. He never knew what would set him off. And something had clearly bothered him at the dinner. He'd have to just persevere.

"I'd understand if you're not...comfortable with having me at your apartment...after everything...you can just tell me."

Daniel frowned.

Johnny studied him. He couldn't tell if he'd messed up again.

Daniel took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders back, squaring himself up, making himself taller.

"You're invited Johnny," he said slowly. "Okay? I didn't lie about the friend's thing. Ma likes having people over. Used to have people over all the time in Newark. Like all the time. Either there were people at our place or we were at someone else's. Crammed into small kitchens and apartments. It never clicked how much she missed it. And heck, I missed it. Having people over. I didn't...Ali never really came over. It was like this unspoken thing right? I didn't go to her place, or like through the doors and she didn't really come into my apartment either. We met elsewhere," he laughed.

"Movies mostly. Lots of movies. I think I've seen everything that came out last year. I was getting sick of popcorn. But that's beside the point. I don't know what you're thinking in that pretty head of yours. But the invite is there. Not with a caveat or whatever. You. Johnny Lawrence. Have an open invitation to dinner. Heck, Ma's busy and you want something I'll cook. Ma will be happy to have you at our table. I will... be down for it too. You're quiet. It's kind of nice to have someone listen to my nonsense. And Ma's nonsense. You'll get sick of us eventually. It's not a peaceful household.

"Lots of chatter about everything, about nothing. Phone calls are hours long. It's why Mr. Miyagi rarely comes over. Ma's been trying to get him to come for dinner for months. Absolute failure. He's very polite about it. But I think he can barely handle me. Put Ma and me together and it's just a pure nightmare of never-ending conversation. Overwhelming for such a quiet guy. So you know. I'm inviting you. 'kay? You can just show up on our doorstep. I'm not going to freak out. Ma's not going to freak out.

"You're not like a guy from a slasher flick, you know that right? Like you're some karate badass, but you're not scary on your own. Does that make sense? Like Johnny without the cobras is just Johnny. Johnny with the cobras? Sometimes it sets off a little flutter of panic. But Johnny without the cobras, man, alarm bells don't go off. I think it's because I kicked your ass." Daniel was grinning, a big smile.

"I know I can take you. So like, it's fine. The playing field is level, right? You got all those muscles but I'm not scared of them. Hope that's not offending. Ha, it's like what you said on the beach. Sometimes stuff sounds more offensive than you think it does in your head until you hear it leave your lips. My karate is all defense right, and my apartment is my home field. I don't know Johnny. I don't think you're going to snap suddenly after what, almost a month of making yourself useful and helpful and working so hard. I don't see you as that kind of person. Like I did at first. Thought it was a total trick. Thought Mr. Miyagi had lost it. You were some evil mastermind hard at work trying to get me to let my guard down. But nah. That isn't you. Like what would the point be in that? Like what evil mastermind makes sure I get home safe, time after time? Or that I'm okay at a party even though I was dating your ex but was so far gone because apparently, I'm so ridiculously awful with beer?

"And you. Ah what's it that my neighbors would say? I'll think of it. I know I will. It'll come to me. I can't have lived in Jersey, been hanging out near New York City, and forgotten the little bits of Hebrew I picked up. You know that's something that sucks around here. How do you not have a good everything bagel? Lox. I miss good lox. Do you know what lox is? A good bagel with cream cheese and salmon and some dill. Absolutely delightful. Great breakfast. But can't find a nice Jewish shop to try it around here. I think it's just because I don't know where any are. Damn. I'm rambling again. There was a point in there somewhere. Where'd it go? What was it?"

Daniel chewed on his bottom lip brows furrowed.

"Ah, right. Johnny Lawrence, friends are always welcome, the door is always open. Not *just* because Ma misses the house being full, but because...because...it's nice having you around. Aha! We're here!"

Johnny had been staring at Daniel. The way the sunlight was golden and how it made his tan skin glow as he drove.

He didn't normally like other people driving him around. It was a lack of control. He wanted to control where he was going. To be in charge, to hold his own life in his hands.

It was one of the few things he could control.

But Daniel looked so peaceful, relaxed as he drove, as he talked. Brown eyes occasionally glancing at Johnny as he spoke. The radio was on, but unlike in the Avanti it wasn't blasting. Just a quiet additional noise in the background.

He thought the Ford was silly. Beautiful but silly. It was yellow after all. Who wanted a yellow car?

But it was like the Avanti. The top could go down.

It was a classic. A well-loved and cared-for classic.

And it fit.

Daniel was also well cared for and loved. It was clear at dinner, looking at the photos of Daniel and all his friends. At the family photos. At the way his mother ruffled his hair at dinner. The way she talked about him. The look his father had in his eyes when they were in photos together, from the first moment, the baby photo of Mr. LaRusso holding Daniel to the last one Johnny had seen, standing together at Coney Island.

It felt almost inevitable, to be pulled into his orbit. To join the others who liked being around Daniel.

It took him a moment to registered they'd parked. Daniel turned to Johnny, eyes hard, serious.

"If you so much as make a move for your wallet I will slap you. This is on me. Understand?"

Johnny nodded and Daniel grinned. "Good. So Ma said that according to her coworkers if there's one thing to try it's Spago's duck sausage

pizza though it kind of sounds blasphemous. But like only in the way California seems like it can ruin a perfectly good pizza. It's piqued my curiosity, but they got other stuff. That's just the only recommendation Ma had. But you're from around here so you might know something else that's good. Whatever you want."

With that, Daniel slipped out of the car, slinging his keys around his index then slipping them into his pocket and shutting the door to the Ford. Johnny followed and looked at Spago with its drab doorway and browning grass it looked unassuming, if not for the crowd.

His mother had mentioned it. The delight in her voice when she whispered that if they left you waiting too long you got free champagne.

"Did you make a reservation?" Johnny asked following Daniel through the large crowd of waiting patrons.

Daniel turned with a grin and winked at him and then turned back to the maître d', talking quickly and low so Johnny didn't hear what he said.

He was looking around, wondering if he'd have to name drop. One of the few pluses of being Sid's stepson meant he could pull strings fairly easily. Sid hated when he did it, but Sid hated practically everything. And if that didn't work, one of the other guys usually was enough.

Jimmy's family knew almost all the restaurants, or Bobby's. It'd made life easy with Ali. Because Johnny could always get them in anywhere. And Ali, well she also could get him in other places. All the art places. All the shows.

He kind of missed sneaking backstage with her, making her way through the back halls of museums to peruse the collections with gloves on and see what no one else got to see. She was always brave. Always down for an adventure. They'd been full of bad ideas but on the same wavelength that it seemed like good ideas.

He was pretty sure that the Ali he dated once upon a time was gone. She'd grown up without telling him. Became serious about her future and hadn't shared the memo, left him behind.

Daniel turned and grabbed Johnny's hand, following a waiter who snagged two menus and dipped into the restaurant and Johnny wondered if he'd had a reservation. Though it didn't add up. They'd made plans that afternoon. Maybe he'd annoyed the maître d' enough

that he relented just to get rid of them. Or maybe this was one of the multitudes of Daniel Johnny didn't know yet.

They walked past a large brick pizza oven and open kitchen and were shown to their seats. They were handed their menus and Johnny flicked his open.

Daniel had mentioned a pizza, duck sausage? He tried to remember what his mother had said of the place as his eyes ran through appetizers and salads to a pasta that said it came with smoked salmon and gold caviar.

He frowned.

This was too expensive.

His eyes ran over the main dishes, a grilled chicken in herbs and garlic, it was simple but bizarrely more expensive than the caviar pasta. Fish was out of the question. It was way too expensive.

Daniel kicked him without any force behind it. Johnny looked up startled.

"I know that look on your face Johnny. You're looking for the cheapest thing on the menu. Ali always picked the damn salad, if you pick out a salad I think I might kick you again."

"Salad?" Johnny asked with a frown.

Ali always got steaks and burgers and lobster. She wasn't a cheap date. They always got dessert. The most ridiculous thing they saw on the menu. She always had to have her own. And then she'd steal bites of whatever Johnny got. She said salad was rabbit food and felt bad for all the girls who couldn't just eat what they wanted on their dates. She sure must've changed. Maybe it came with wanting to be a doctor. She got serious.

That spark went in Daniel's eyes, the flicker of anger. "Let me guess, she never got the salad with you?" He sighed and rubbed his face. "Damn. Okay."

He took a deep breath then looked at Johnny. "Just get something that sounds good, okay? Like actual food. I got this. I wouldn't have come here if I didn't think I could cover it. So like pick something you'll actually enjoy."

Johnny nodded. looking through the menu. Maybe they could share something. Pizza.

"I'm going to order the duck sausage pizza, even though it's a crime. If you want you can have some, but I want you to get something else. If you want to share things, I'm down, but I'm buying you your own meal. And dessert. We can split a dessert," Daniel said.

Johnny looked at his menu again. No to pizza then. Maybe a calzone? Why was everything so expensive?

He was sure there had to be cheaper places out there. Pizza and calzones should be bought for cheap, not whatever price this nonsense was.

Were they paying for the brick oven?

The location?

He heard Daniel shifting in his seat, the sound of his chair moving closer. Johnny didn't lookup.

They'd brought them a basket of warm bread. He could try and get something small and just fill up on free bread.

Daniel would kill him.

Something touched his leg.

Daniel had hooked his legs around his.

The table was small, they'd been bound to bump their knees against each other even if they sat back a bit, but Daniel had his ankles crossed behind Johnny's like he was trying to keep Johnny from running away, or like reassure himself that Johnny was still there.

He looked up at Daniel flipping through his menu nonchalantly. Another strange quirk.

"I'm not going to run," Johnny said amused.

Sometimes Daniel seemed like a kid.

Daniel flipped the page of his menu. "You're sneaky Johnny Lawrence. I don't trust you're not going to still try to pay. This way you can't leave my sight. I've got you."

His eyes flicked up and met Johnny's.

That look wasn't a look of a playful kid. Johnny quickly looked back down at his menu, heart pounding fast. It meant nothing. Daniel was always touching him. He was probably still just trying to figure out how to sit across from Johnny. Like during the dinner at Daniel's house. When he kept stretching out his leg to press his against Johnny's under the table. The guy just needed to know he wasn't alone.

Tactile. Daniel was tactile. It meant nothing.

The back of his neck felt like it was on fire.

Avocado and Maui onions. What even was that? Blood pink carpaccio. The hell was this menu?

Daniel wasn't moving his legs. Johnny wouldn't be able to get up without a huge ordeal. He was effectively trapped.

What was a radicchio? Was it a radish? Why not just say radish? Was it something else? How does one roast a salad in butter? Doesn't that defeat the purpose of it being a salad? Of course, this place would serve oysters.

The waitress came over, Johnny flipped back to the pizza and calzone section.

"I'll do the artichoke and eggplant calzone, with garlic," Johnny said after Daniel ordered his duck sausage pizza.

She flashed him a smile and left to put their orders in.

"Artichoke and eggplant?" Daniel blanched. "Seriously? What is wrong with California? What happened to a good old-fashioned pizza? Calzones are fine, but you essentially got a salad version of a pizza. Artichoke and eggplant. Really? Duck sausage. This place, *this place* is the most popular spot on the Sunset Strip? With this pizza?"

He was all wound up, pissed on behalf of New Jersey and New York. This, *exactly this* was Daniel talking shit and not realizing he was going to piss off everyone within earshot.

A bunch of Californians excited to try new flavor combinations and to enjoy a night in a place that was hard to get into. To specifically try weird shit like duck sausage pizza. It was what they liked.

This was what Johnny meant when he worried that Daniel mouth would get him into trouble.

But he was so damn passionate about it. It was kind of funny. Hands flying, talking about *real* pizza, what pizza actually meant in New Jersey. Exaggerated complaints.

"If anyone from Jersey found out I ate this, they'd never let me back in the state."

Johnny smirked, it was a funny thought. He doubted they'd be able to keep him out long. He'd figure a way in.

Daniel was shifting in his seat, moving his chair closer to the table. He'd fallen silent, was checking out the open kitchen and the brick oven.

"Okay, the oven is cool," he admitted turning back to meet Johnny's eyes.

"So, Mr. Enchino Hills, have you been here before?"

Johnny shook his head. "No, Mom's talked about it."

Daniel grinned. He looked proud of himself. He talked about the coolest restaurants he'd been to. The weirdest ones. Their food came. They split both. The duck sausage pizza with its tomato, mozzarella, and basil.

Daniel looked pissed when he ate it.

"I like it," he complained. "How? How is this good? What the hell?"

Johnny laughed. It *was* good. He also liked the calzone that Daniel shared with him and that seemed to piss him off more.

"Have I been in California too long? Is it the water? The air? That, what did you call it? Santa Ana winds? Do those fuck up your sense of taste? Is this witchcraft? No one in Newark is going to believe me that this shits good."

"You'll have to make them come here, then, try it for themselves."

Daniel laughed. "Right, I can totally see Uncle Louie here or my grandparents. They'd cross themselves at the door and I'd have to shove them through the doorway to get in. They'd just eat the grilled chicken. I'd have to sneak it to them. Not let them see the menu. Not

tell them at all. They're too stubborn."

Seemed like a family trait.

It was pleasant. Just the two of them, in a loud busy restaurant. It was too many people but it was easy to just focus on Daniel. To listen to him talk, at ease despite the fact he was throwing out fighting words almost every other sentence. Lucky that everyone else was too busy, too cheerful to care.

Their leftovers were packed up and Johnny thought it was time to go but Daniel still held his leg between his and leaned forward. "Which dessert sounded good?"

"I'm quite full." Full of cheese and bread and tomato from calzones and pizza.

"Just a bite then. I'll get something. We'll share. Which one?"

Johnny had watched the desserts come out. The woman working on them in the open kitchen, adding finishing touches before they left her watchful eyes. The fruit tart was popular but small, and the chocolate tart was common. Most people seemed to order it. There was an almost green pale sorbet with blueberries and a basic-looking apple pie.

"You get to pick," Daniel said. Waiting patiently.

"Do you like lemon and almonds?" Johnny asked.

"Not going for the chocolate torte?"

"I don't think it'd hold a candle to what your mother made."

It was true. He didn't think he'd ever have such a nice chocolate cake again. It was ruined for him, the rest of his life he'd compare all chocolate cakes and tortes to it and be disappointed.

Daniel's face lit up at that, his smile bright, eyes sparkling. "It was a what, paste cake? Okay, lemon can cut through all the heavy things we ate. I like it." He turned to catch the waitress's eye and put in their final order.

Johnny ate more of it than he meant to. He meant to let Daniel have all of it but a bite. But it was light and refreshing.

They split it fairly equally, not playfully bickering over the last bite.

Which happened every time he'd gone out with Ali. She usually stole the last bite, even if they got separate desserts, and would fall into a fit of laughter at his face.

He'd be too slow.

Eventually, it was just a game. He let her have it. But the game was in the fun of making her work for it. Trying to stab his fork down faster than hers, but always slow enough that she'd beat him. She'd like Spago's. She'd probably already been there with her parents. Opening night he bet. She'd have gotten the fish. She'd know what radicchio was.

He wondered if Daniel did.

"What is a radicchio, do you know?" Johnny asked.

Daniel blinked at him, setting his fork down.

"It was on the menu, in one of the salads," Johnny added.

"It's a leafy vegetable. You know salad mixes? It's the purple-y red and white stuff. It's a type of Chicory, Ma uses it in some of her risotto."

"So *not* a radish."

Daniel smiled softly. "No, not a radish. Think like a cabbage."

The waitress came back and Daniel paid. He looked pleased with himself. They gathered up the leftovers and walked back to the Ford.

It had looked so unassuming from the outside, but Johnny felt warm.

It'd been nice.

The crowd outside hadn't dwindled.

Daniel started talking about weird leafy vegetables. Stuff his mother used in her cooking. Things he knew about radicchio. Apparently, it was a very Italian vegetable. Or from Italy.

After a while, he asked, "So what movie are we seeing?"

"I don't know. The guys said they already bought the tickets. They...don't always pick good movies. So, it might be a bad one."

"What like something rated Nc-17?" Daniel asked. He was grinning,

playful again.

Johnny flushed red. "No! Like they like watching bad flicks. Like with bad acting. You know like B movies? But they like watching normal stuff too. It's all over the place. We've seen some cool foreign films because they're down for it. Dutch whines about subtitles, but he usually calms down once he gets into the plot. But I don't know whose picking the film this time or what it is. I just...it might be bad."

Daniel shrugged, "I'm down no matter what. I think I've seen every good movie that came out last semester."

Ali. With Ali. Of course.

She liked going to the movies almost as much as the guys did. It was how they met anyway. He hoped she wasn't there tonight. He didn't want to see her. And the guys, the guys were still pissed on his behalf. They held grudges like a Koala clung to a eucalyptus tree.

Chapter End Notes

> Spago's was a real place that opened in the 84 in LA and apparently was one of the places to be. I did a price conversion from how much everything cost then versus now and yikes it was expensive.
> A review from 1984 about Spago: https://www.lamag.com/digestblog/flashback-friday-a-new-little-spot-called-spago/

Peacock

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daniel had run through their apartment to find his mother.

He'd done it.

Gotten Johnny to agree to dinner.

It *wasn't* a date. But it felt like one. He ticked off another date in his mental box. *Not a date.* But he'd laid it on thick. Flirty. The guy was made of stone or something. He needed something good.

He accosted her in the living room, a flurry of movement, tripping over his words. But it got through. He needed a nice place to take Johnny for dinner. Finally paying off that IOU.

She grinned and waltzed over to the phone.

"You watch and learn."

She made calls.

Chatted with coworkers, who had promised her things, working her way through until she got a last-minute reservation at Spago. Pulling strings, cashing in on things owed to her.

It helped to have a mother who was social and knew people well. One second she was calling and asking about their kids, about how their parents were doing, how their dog was, all the little tidbits she remembered because she was a people person.

She remembered everything.

And the next thing he knew she was writing down an address, going over with him how to get there and what to tell the host.

What to whisper since he wouldn't be in the book, but that there would be a table, ready when he got there.

Like magic.

His mother sometimes was pure magic.

She may not have the extensive network she did in Newark but she'd already set up her web in LA.

He kissed her on the cheek and ran to get ready.

She had backups.

A list, just in case it didn't work out.

But he knew it would. It always did. Plus they'd give him a discount. The pricey menu would be half what it normally would.

He could do this.

He could treat Johnny, and *treat him well.*

He was too excited.

And it worked.

He waltzed in, straight to the guy at the front, said the guy's name and the guy looked surprised to hear his full name and not just the name on his name tag, and Daniel mentioned the table his mother reserved, the little code, and boom.

They were in.

He liked the way Johnny seemed stunned. Surprised.

He didn't ask to know how Daniel had accomplished it. Just seemed to take it in stride. Magic.

That was nice.

But he looked so nervous seeing the prices on the menu. Looked like he was going to run. Bolt. Couldn't have that. He slipped his legs around Johnny's. Watched the way he blushed and hid behind his menu.

Nice. Cute. Maybe there was a chance.

The food was so good it made Daniel mad.

He kept expecting Johnny to tell him to shut up.

But he just looked amused.

And Daniel was nervous. Nervous that someone would realize maybe they didn't actually belong there. A kid from Jersey with a kid from the Hills. Playing at being adults. A date that wasn't a date.

He wanted to do this again. A thousand times. Pick Johnny up, go somewhere fun, sit and eat weird food with him, delicious things, strange things, new things. Watch the way he tried things, slowly tasting it like he was trying to take it apart, figure out how the flavors worked.

How he listened to Daniel, never seemed to tire of it.

When he offered dessert he thought Johnny might try and bolt again and tighten his grip on Johnny's leg. But he didn't. He picked something Daniel wouldn't have.

The way he dismissed the chocolate cake, complimented his mother's cooking so easily Daniel wanted to lean over the table and kiss him, right there in front of everyone.

It had been good. Everything had been good. He even asked Daniel to explain something, curious if Daniel knew in a soft voice and Daniel was delighted that he did.

Delighted to watch Johnny soak up the information in the sweetest way. The urge to kiss him bubbled up again.

Movies and dinner had been most of Daniel and Ali's dates.

It was hard not to feel the ghost of his past relationship.

But Johnny was very different from Ali. Quiet. Attentive.

He was still healing Daniel knew. Readjusting to life without Cobra Kai, without Kreese.

But if Daniel looked close enough he could see new growth, like the green buds of leaves after a long winter. It was slow, but it was happening.

He didn't know what Mr. Miyagi was working on with him, but they were getting there.

He wanted to help, wanted to protect that new growth, support him, keep him safe.

One day he thought, maybe, they could come to someplace like this

again and he'd get Johnny to talk more.

They could playfully tease each other.

They'd get there.

He was sure of it.

And he was looking forward to it. To many more dinners shared with Johnny Lawrence.

The ex-cobras were milling around the front of the theater under the bright lights, waiting. They looked happy to see them. The old anger, the heat in their eyes when they looked at Daniel was gone. The atmosphere was light, cheerful. Every time he saw them he half expected things to go south, but they were pulled into the group, arm thrown around Daniel's shoulder and one of them threw an arm around Johnny's waist, familiar, friendly, full of smiles and happiness.

Jimmy was asking him what snacks they should get, Tommy was complaining about some family thing he'd had over the weekend, Dutch was whispering something in Johnny's ear that earned him a swat and Bobby had the tickets and was directing their group like he was herding them through like if he didn't they'd just stand around and hang out and miss the movie. With the tired practice of a veteran kindergarten teacher.

He wondered if that happened. If sometimes the ex-cobras would plan something and just not show up because they were too busy enjoying one another's company. If it didn't matter because they were just happy to be together.

They got popcorn. Jimmy leaned over the glass counter and pulled Daniel forward, asking him what he liked. Daniel picked out sour patch kids, too full really to want anything but appreciating the effort, and the box was pressed into his hands along with several others to carry to their seats.

Daniel found himself on the end of the row. Johnny sitting between him and Bobby. He was in charge of their popcorn and Daniel was in charge of candy, sharing his sour patch kids.

It was weird to be at the movies without Ali.

He'd been a little tense, worried they'd run into her. But there'd been something nice about the ex-cobras surrounding him. Like a little

shield.

He didn't think they knew.

Not how badly he'd obliterated his relationship with Ali.

How tersely she spoke with him when she had to. She was still pissed. And he got it. He hadn't handled it well. But everything felt like a ghost of her. The movie theater, the seats, the smell of popcorn. How did Johnny handle it?

"Hey, you okay?"

Daniel blinked and looked at Johnny, who was staring at him, brow furrowed with concern. He was overthinking things.

Yeah, it was weird. But Ali wasn't here. Johnny was.

It wasn't like he could avoid movie theaters for the rest of his life because he was trying not to run into Ali.

He had school with her and that was going fine. Though it helped that other people had filled the void. That his class partners had changed.

He smiled softly at Johnny and grabbed a handful of popcorn.

"Yeah," he said, offering some sour patch kids.

Johnny studied him for half a second longer, then took the offered candy and returned to the movie.

It fit. It was some crime film with a good guy hunting down a murderer. It seemed like the type of movie the cobras would pick.

A tough guy film.

He nearly laughed. He wasn't sure what he'd expected them to pick. But this was so very cliché. He wondered if this was *all* they watched. If they only ever saw romantic films, if they sat with their girlfriends at those, or if they came together. Or if it was only this. He tried to imagine them sniffing and crying at some dramatic sappy romantic film and the thought was hilarious.

Johnny had made it seem like the options were eclectic. That they'd sit through b movies and foreign films. But it was hard to imagine.

He wanted to wrap an arm around Johnny's shoulder. He wanted to

reach over and take his hand.

Daniel held his candy tightly. The cake had been enough. He didn't really need anything else. But it kept him from touching Johnny. Kept his hands to himself.

For about half the movie.

Until he ran out.

Until he couldn't stop himself.

He had to try. Had to see what would happen.

He was in the aisle.

He could run if it didn't go well.

He'd already noted the exits.

He just had to get up, turn and bolt out the door and the other guys could drive Johnny home. But he doubted it would become that.

Not this Johnny. He put his hand on Johnny's leg as casually as he could. Like it was the most normal thing in the world. Higher up his thigh than he had before.

And he left it there, watching the film like he suddenly was very invested in the plot and his heart wasn't in his throat threatening to rebel and run before he did.

Did the guys usually touch him so much that this was nothing?

Daniel frowned, resting his elbow on his other armrest and putting his cheek against his palm, letting his eyes flick down the aisle.

They were all watching the movie.

Johnny was just ever so slightly stiffer than normal.

So he had noticed. Daniel smiled softly.

He'd been worried Johnny just was immune.

But now the concern was that this was normal.

Was it a California thing?

A rich kid Encino Hills thing?

They just always touched each other, if so how high? As high as the grey shorts Johnny wore after school at practices? In gym?

That stirred up some jealousy.

He chewed on his bottom lip.

Maybe he just didn't get that Daniel was trying to flirt.

Maybe California guys didn't get it.

All used to living in sunny California and spending their time on the beach so all those barriers were blurred.

He was starting to feel like a peacock, a bird doing a little dance but being ignored because Johnny wasn't the same type of bird.

Maybe he was like those ostriches that screwed up so bad they flirted with humans instead of other ostriches.

He wasn't pushing Daniel's hand off of him.

He should've gone for Johnny's hand.

Should've tried to hold it.

This was probably just buddy buddy to him.

Oh, what was wrong with California boys?

He was panicking a little.

Ali would've known what he was doing by now.

He was pretty sure any other human would've known he was flirting. That this wasn't platonic.

Maybe Johnny was humoring him. Still felt bad and thought Daniel could do whatever he wanted within reason.

He didn't like that.

What if one of those girls from school had already nabbed him?

What if he'd missed his window?

What if he'd been too slow?

He thought he was moving too fast.

That Johnny needed time to find his footing, adjust his stance.

But the girls had dispersed like someone had staked their claim already.

His hand was getting clammy. Something warm patted his hand gently.

Daniel glanced over.

It was a there-there pat.

Johnny wasn't looking at him, but his hand was close to his, he could strike.

If he hurried he could turn that *You're hand is all sweaty and tense on my leg, you okay bro?* into holding his hand.

He flipped his hand over and when Johnny brought his hand down for another awkward pat Daniel caught his hand in his, holding it tight.

Johnny looked startled. Daniel had caught him by surprise.

He grinned. He wasn't going to let go. Johnny would have to get a crowbar. This hand was his now, for the rest of the movie. And maybe it'd get through that thick head of his.

Johnny didn't try to pull his hand away but Daniel caught him, covering his face a little. The way he always did when he was hit.

Okay.

He needed a book. Someone who knew Johnny to start deciphering things. Because that seemed like this was fine. Or maybe he was laughing.

Daniel really couldn't tell in the dark.

Was this a good thing?

A bad thing?

It seemed cute. He seemed embarrassed.

But who knew? Johnny was making it so hard to tell what worked and what didn't, or if anything even worked at all.

Daniel didn't let go of Johnny's hand until the credits rolled. He gathered up his trash and stretched before heading out to wait for everyone.

It might not have been a date. But if it had been a date, he was pretty pleased.

Even if he was more confused than ever.

It took a while but they came out, chattering about the film, hands-on Johnny. His lower arms, his back, avoiding the area Daniel had told them about, but still touching him.

Dutch ruffled Johnny's hair with a laugh.

Johnny glared, smoothing it back down.

No wonder he barely reacted most of the time. He had to be bolder.

"Hey, LaRusso," Jimmy called, giving Johnny a push forward towards Daniel. "Get our Johnny home safe will ya?"

"Of course. See you at school," Daniel said stepping forward, he had seconds to pick a move.

One of them had put their arm around his waist.

He liked that.

He'd do that.

He caught Johnny around the waist, arm resting the way it had when they'd been in the mountains. He hadn't tried to walk like that. It kind of worked. He steered Johnny out of the theater and back to the Ford. He stopped at the passenger door, dragging his arm away once they reached the door and gently pressing his palm on the small of his back, lingering a beat obviously too long before pulling away from him to get to the driver's side.

He turned on the radio, drummed his fingers along the steering wheel, and sang along.

It was that time. When all the songs were love songs and he kept glancing at Johnny.

But he was back to being unreadable.

Which was frustrating.

He was being so obvious.

And Johnny was oblivious.

He was definitely a peacock.

He had to figure out what Johnny was because apparently, it wasn't on the same wavelength.

He pulled up at the mansion.

Maybe he could kiss him.

That'd be obvious.

Guys didn't platonically kiss each other too often.

Not after dinner and the movies for sure.

He could lean over, try to be smooth, act like he was going to open the door for him without leaving the car which always felt a little rude but go in for a kiss instead, or help with the seatbelt and kiss him, or he could- *damn where'd he go?*

Daniel had been so busy trying to think of his move and Johnny had slipped out of the car and was already walking up to the mansion.

He'd said something.

Daniel had missed it.

Johnny paused at the door and Daniel wondered if he ran, if he threw open the car door, if he could still kiss him before he went into the mansion.

He knew he wasn't fast enough.

But maybe he could yell something, shout something to stop him from disappearing into that big dark house.

But what? His mind was always full of chatter. Always full of things to say but he didn't have a clue what to say and Johnny had the door open and was turning, gave him a little wave, and disappeared inside

before he could untangle the mess in his head to come up with a plan.

Damnit.

His fingers were gripping the steering wheel too tightly.

He drove home, turning the music off.

It wasn't like that'd been his last chance.

He chewed on his bottom lip.

But it'd been a perfect one.

A nice night.

A fun night.

The perfect night to make a move and he failed.

He struck out by being too slow.

Even though he promised himself to be slow. That he wouldn't rush.

If Johnny wasn't even learning karate yet it'd probably be too early to do anything. But he'd still wanted to kiss him.

He continued to mull it over as he climbed the steps to the apartment and pushed open the door.

His mother was still up, drinking hot chocolate and reading a book. She smiled when he came in.

"How'd it go?" she asked, patting the space next to her on the couch.

Daniel sank down into the couch, putting his leg up on the coffee table.

She'd put so much work into getting him the reservation. So he told her all about Spago. About the food he ate, the food he shared with Johnny, how weird but good it was, what Johnny had said when it came time for dessert.

Her face lit up. She was delighted. Just like he knew she would be.

He talked about the movie. He thought she might like it. So he didn't

spoil it.

Told her he drove Johnny home and then

"And I was too slow to kiss him. He was out of the car before I even..."

He froze. He hadn't meant to say that aloud.

"Ma, I mean... I didn't mean..."

"Valentine's day is Thursday," Lucille said getting up and walking over to the kitchen.

She grabbed her recipe box and her cookbook and came back.

"Ma?" Daniel squeaked.

"Chocolate biscotti?" Lucille asked setting a recipe down. She flipped through her box. "Oh, I have this truffle recipe I got from a New York Chocolatier. We could make truffles."

"Ma!"

"Yes, dear?" She asked, looking up from the book in her lap.

"I-I..."

"Like Johnny. I'm aware. I wasn't sure if *you* were aware though."

"What?"

Her gaze fell back to the book. "You could make him candies. There's a whole section in here on candies. Caramel maybe. You think Johnny likes caramel?"

"Wait, wait," Daniel said turning to her. "What do you mean you were *aware*?"

"Does he have a bike?"

"A bike? What do you mean?"

"Like a motorcycle or dirt bike?"

"I mean yeah, but I don't know what that has to do with anything. I mean they were on their bikes when we met. Drove them onto the beach."

She hmmed, turning back to her book. "You were saying Bobby makes sweets, so probably shouldn't do any cookies or cupcakes or stuff like that."

"Ma!"

She sighed and patted his arm. "Honey, he's a blonde whose cool. A muscular, popular, tough guy who has a cool bike and car, wears that leather jacket. And now he's sweet and kind to you. He's being nice. It's kismet. Plus you're very obviously constantly flirting with him. I saw the looks at dinner. How you touched his leg in the car."

She knew. She made it sound like he had a type.

"But...how did you? He can't even tell I'm flirting."

"I'm your mother."

He swallowed his response. He sunk deeper into the couch.

"What if he doesn't like me back?" he asked softly.

She scoffed. "Is this because of the girls?"

"What?"

"You were floating along without a care in the world. Flirting but just enjoying flirting. And then at dinner, you said Johnny was swarmed by girls, and your voice was all tight." She poked him in the arm. "You were upset, even though you laughed." She studied him.

Daniel looked away.

"You're not going to lose your window. I doubt it I mean. I say ignore it."

He blinked and looked back at her.

She sighed. "Laura and I are going for high tea at the Getty Villa. I'll see if you have anything to worry about." She held up her hands. "I'll be discrete. But honey, you're hanging out with him and his friends near constantly. And when he's not with you, isn't he with Mr. Miyagi? I think you'd notice if he suddenly was back on the dating scene."

He mulled that over. She was right. He'd just have to keep an eye out. But he didn't want to miss his shot. But he did miss just casually

flirting. Seeing what landed and what didn't. What got a reaction. Not a lot yet seemed to.

But he'd work on it. Take a peek under that cool guy exterior. Then he'd lift up the mask and give him a real kiss. The only concern was that under that mask were nothing but tears.

She tapped the cookbook again. "So, what do you want to make?"

He leaned over, looking over at the glossy pages. At the recipe cards, she'd set out.

He had known his mother wouldn't really care, but there'd been a small bit of him that'd been scared. Worried.

He hadn't meant to tell her. But it was a relief that it didn't change anything. He picked up one of the recipe cards.

"Let's make this one."

She grinned. "Good choice. The best way to a guy's heart is through his stomach, right?"

He laughed.

"Alright, I will pick up the ingredients tomorrow after work, and then we can make some tests. Then you can make them on your own Wednesday, take them and give them to Johnny on Thursday. And I can enjoy all the rejects. I like this plan. Maybe I'll take some to work. They'll like it."

"Oh, I almost forgot," Daniel said. "I'll get it later, but we had too much food. So I brought you back leftovers from Spago."

"You'll get it later you say. Give me your keys. I want to try this nonsense myself," she said getting up quickly and holding her hand out for the keys.

He laughed and passed them over.

"Duck on pizza. Grease on grease. What a terrible idea." She was still grumbling about it as she left.

She returned with the boxes. He'd forgotten to give Johnny his leftover calzone. Been too preoccupied. Too lost in thought.

His mother returned with a reheated piece of pizza to the couch and

took a bite. Her nose wrinkled. She took another bite. She looked at Daniel with a frown.

He laughed. "Right?"

"What sort of sorcery is this?"

"It works. Everything they made worked. It was all delicious!"

"I'm stealing this. This is my lunch tomorrow. I'm taking it to work. I get why you were mad. This was normally how much?"

"You don't want to know."

Chapter End Notes

> So the ostriches flirting/doing their dance for humans is a...thing. And there have been other studies of birds flirting with humans. But here's an old BBC article on the ostrich-specific one: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland/2834025.stm
>
> Oh, also the movie they saw was "Witness." Because uhhh awkwardly a lot of the films in January/February 1985 were like the same plot of Karate Kid of new kids moving to a new town and then ending up with the local blonde "gang" leaders girl and thus having to like fight for their lives against the local bullies. And I just couldn't come up with a way in which that wouldn't be awkward AF. lol

Intervention and Lavender Cookies

Valentine's Day week snuck up on Johnny. He hadn't been paying attention. Hadn't noticed the pink, red, and white that exploded over the school. Hadn't noticed the flower sign-ups.

He'd forgotten about it.

Until the guys filled up the Avanti and he didn't know why they were there.

School had ended.

They'd all driven their own cars.

Johnny had enough time to grab his bonsai before Bobby sat on it, as they drummed on his seats.

"So, Valentine's Day. What do you have planned?" Tommy asked leaning forward.

"Nothing."

"Nothing!" Jimmy sounded scandalized. "For Ali, you always had flowers for her. A bouquet of the stupid expensive shit from the florist that you ordered *months* in advance. She nearly got buried in it when she opened her locker the first year you guys dated. Then you took her out skating. The other year it was dancing and you snuck champagne right? Got those expensive chocolates imported from... Oh, where was it again?"

"Peru," Tommy said.

"Right. From there. You got a private dinner reservation where it was just the two of you and that five-star chef," Jimmy continued.

"And you got nothing for Daniel?" Dutch said with a frown. "Seriously?"

"I forgot about Valentine's Day okay?" Johnny said starting the car. He also didn't know how he could afford any of that anymore. He didn't have a date fund. He didn't have money to splurge. Not much. Sid had given him so much money to spoil Ali. "Where are we going? What's happening here?"

"Apparently an intervention," Bobby said with a laugh. "Let's go to my place."

"Am I seriously driving you all to the Brown's?"

"Yes," Bobby said putting on his seatbelt. "Drive on chauffeur."

Johnny rolled his eyes and made his way to Bobby's house.

"I was worried this would happen," Bobby said.

"What would happen?"

"You'd drop the ball."

"What ball?"

"In old fancy ways," Tommy said. "You're courting and you missed prepping for the big event."

"We're seniors, not kindergartens. We don't need to make a big deal out of Valentine's Day. It's a stupid holiday anyway."

"You didn't think so with Ali. What, is big strong Johnny scared that Daniel won't like whatever you plan? Or did you make a move after the movie and he didn't like it?" Jimmy asked.

"I doubt that, I mean did you see the way he put his arm around Johnny's waist?" Dutch laughed. "Also I'm pretty sure I saw him holding your hand."

Bobby frowned and Johnny could feel him staring. He avoided looking.

"You *still* like Daniel don't you?" Tommy asked.

"Yes," Johnny said through gritted teeth.

"You're scared!" Bobby said.

"I am not scared!"

"You are! You're scared shitless that what? We're getting your hopes up and he doesn't actually like you? Or...oh."

"Oh what?" Johnny said whirling to look at him as he stopped at the red light. "What Bobby? You read me so well, what the hell am I

scared of huh?"

"That he'll leave you suddenly like Ali did," Bobby said softly after a while.

Johnny frowned, turning back and driving. He hated that Bobby could do that. He knew where all the chinks in his armor were and how to peek in and see straight through. He was too good at reading Johnny. Too empathetic.

"What's your plan Bobby Brown?" he asked.

"My house is chaos. I was going to put you all to work." Bobby said softly. "My little siblings have already jumped ship."

Johnny scoffed.

Of course.

The day before Valentine's Day was when Bobby's life always turned upside down. Usually, he was the one abandoning ship.

It was when his parents were working wildly in the house, trying to cram in last minute designs and desserts onto the menus. Testing out new things. They ran headfirst into their deadlines.

Their customers ate it up. Loved showing up on Valentine's Day to see what the newest concoction they'd come up with.

Even if it'd only been finalized 3 hours before they opened.

Bobby usually spent the week leading up to Valentine's Day crashing at Johnny's.

Avoiding the chaos and tired of taste testing which was the right ratio of flavors even if it was only 1 teaspoon difference.

He smirked. Of course, he was calling in reinforcements. Johnny was surprised he hadn't done so earlier. Going home with 4 other teenage boys was sure to help curb the amount of taste testing Bobby and his younger siblings would have to do.

When they were doing karate together they were like locusts. Ate so much food. He was sure they could do that again.

It just depended on how much the house was already drowning in. This he could focus on. He'd hold onto this and ignore the arrow

Bobby had shot straight into his heart.

Walking through the front door of the Brown's house was like walking into a bakery. It smelled sweet and warm.

It always did.

No matter how many times Johnny visited.

He liked the Brown's house. He liked Mr. and Mrs. Brown. He even liked Bobby's little siblings. Even though they were loud and messy.

The first time he'd been there he'd been invited to dinner. They'd ordered a pizza.

They didn't cook.

They baked.

Mrs. Brown had said they were different beasts, cooking and baking.

Mr. Brown said baking was more of a science.

Organized and specific. He made it sound like he was a mad scientist hard at work.

But it was just creative chaos.

A messy kitchen with messy notes covered in batter and vanilla extract. They made their own jams and preserves. Grew their own fruit and had an herb garden that Johnny liked sitting in.

He liked the lavender and the mint that grew there that they picked fresh to use in their testing.

It'd taken almost a year of friendship for Johnny to realize they even had two kitchens.

Their test kitchen was where he and Bobby usually hung out, among the chaos talking about homework and the other kitchen that they showed guests.

They didn't let people into their test kitchen.

Johnny hadn't even realized what a big deal it was until he'd seen other people at their house.

He'd had a lot of firsts at the Brown house.

His first study group session. Him and Bobby trying to figure out algebra even though they went to different schools.

His first board game night.

The first time he'd been to someone's house when it wasn't because of Sid. He'd been to so many parties before going to Bobby's, but the invitations had always been because of parents. Because someone's parents wanted to get on Sid's good side. The kids hadn't actually liked Johnny.

His first sleepover. Bobby had just invited cobras. They'd slept in the living room, after a night of games and music and snack food and more sweets than Johnny thought any parent would normally let their kids have. Before turning out the lights Mr. and Mrs. Brown had tucked all the boys in. Like it was normal. Like that's just what they did. No one made fun of them for it. No one made fun of Bobby.

No one but Johnny's mother had ever tucked him in, and she'd stopped because there wasn't anywhere to tuck him in in the car. And then Sid had told her she was spoiling him. So she hadn't continued it very long after they moved in together. He'd said Johnny was too old to be coddled.

He'd always thought that if something went south fast. Like before he got the Avanti, before he could drive, if something happened to the Avanti or his bike. He'd go to the Browns.

He memorized how to get there on his bike, on foot. He knew how long it'd take. If he ran he could get there much faster. He used to, when he was training, time himself. Running from his house to the Browns.

They weren't close.

But he wanted to make sure he could do it.

If he had to.

They'd always told him he was welcome any time. He could just come over.

But he'd never taken them up on it.

He didn't want to be a burden.

He couldn't think of any way to make himself be useful for them.

He'd just be in the way.

So he only came when he was explicitly invited.

When Bobby dragged him home with him. When it was Bobby's birthday. When they invited him to dinner.

He'd nearly done it once. His mother had been out of town. Which was rare. She'd been invited out with some of the ladies from the country club. She was gone for a weekend.

Sid got drunk.

He'd thought about going to the Browns. But his mother *would* be back. It'd be fine when she got back.

He didn't want to worry the Browns. Didn't want to have to explain.

Johnny slept on the beach.

Mr. Brown was pulling something out of the oven, very slowly, very carefully. He turned and grinned at the boys moving it somewhere to cool.

"Hey! Bobby said he might've been calling in the cavalry!"

Mrs. Brown was curled over their notes. She had flour in her hair.

He liked that they didn't care about their appearances. They were always a mess.

They could clean up.

Johnny nearly hadn't recognized them at a fancy benefit they'd attended. Where they'd met his mom and Sid. They weren't useful to Sid, so he didn't care.

It was better that way. He'd come to realize there was less pressure if Sid didn't like his friends.

If he had, it would've been like Ali. He would've been too interested, too involved. The thought of Sid at his karate matches made his stomach flop. The thought of Sid and Kreese meeting made him feel

sick. It was better to have things separated.

She looked up and smiled. Her hair was up in a messy bun. Glasses low on her nose, threatening to slip off. She pushed them back up with the back of her hand, the only part of her hands that were clean.

"You ready to be put to work?" she asked. Her voice was warm.

"Of course," Johnny said.

She smiled at him. "We've got a few recipes we need tested."

"I woke up inspired," Mr. Brown said with grandiose.

"He woke up scribbling like the combinations in his dreams were good combinations. Like he'd been touched by a muse. I'm pretty sure it's nonsense." She laughed and he pouted. But it was playful. Warm.

He pulled out his notebooks and handed them over to Bobby. "Go use the other kitchen. Don't worry if you destroy it," he said with a grin. "We'll come by with stuff for you to try."

Bobby took charge. Leading them to the pristine kitchen. He read through the recipe and ordered them around.

Johnny wasn't good at cooking or baking.

But Bobby was patient. He kept a watchful eye as he delegated tasks amongst their group.

"And then we need some vinegar."

"Vinegar? Really, let me see that," Johnny said with a frown, snapping up the notes and squinting.

The Browns had doctor handwriting. It was unreadable.

"How can you read this?"

Bobby leaned over and pointed to the chicken scratch., "That says vinegar. I can read my parent's handwriting."

Johnny pushed it back to him and grumbled about who put vinegar in their dessert. But he did as he was told. He couldn't try to decipher the Brown's handwriting. All their special recipes would stay safe forever because no thief would be able to read them. He thought maybe that was the point. Wondered if they'd created their writing style for that

purpose.

He knew though they re-wrote them when they were put into their recipe books and boxes. Those he'd seen. Printed out neatly. But the experiments never were.

The first batch went in the oven and despite his reservations, it smelled good.

But Bobby wasn't done.

There was no rest.

There were more things to make.

More fever dream recipes to test.

It was exhausting. Johnny was covered in sweat. The guys were whining. But it was just like letting out steam. They kept working. Kept kneading dough. Kept mixing batter. Kept whisking. Kept folding meringue.

Johnny wondered if maybe Mr. and Mrs. Brown were stronger than they looked. It was a good workout.

Maybe he could work in a bakery. He could get up before the sun and make bread every morning.

When they were finished the guys sunk dramatically to the floor.

Dutch laid flat on his back on the marble floors.

"When you said we were going to bake for Valentine's day," Dutch said, slapping a flour-covered hand against Bobby's leg. "I thought you meant we'd make like kiddie chocolate or something we could give girls. Not this nonsense."

Bobby frowned dusting off the flour handprint on his leg. "I never said that. I said I'd put you to work and you could take some of it with you."

"I'm realizing now that you neglected to tell us what we'd be making," Jimmy said with a frown. "How strategic Brown."

Johnny sunk to sit on the tile to join them.

Bobby grinned, hands on his hips looking down at them. "You think

those baked goods just show up? Magically are whisked into existence?"

"We get it," Tommy whined. "Your parents do a lot of work."

"Yeah, it's about time you get it. I've been doing this since I was like 5," Bobby said flexing his arms.

The guys tiredly clapped. Applause for the muscle show but too tired to really care. Bobby laughed and crouched down.

"Thanks. My parents are going to really appreciate it."

"No problem. Glad to be of help," Johnny said.

Bobby turned and flicked him on the forehead.

Johnny's hand shot up to his forehead. "What the hell Bobby?"

"You always do that. Get out from under that dark cloud. Thank you for your help. But I didn't bring you here *just* for your muscles. I specifically dragged you here so you could have something to give Daniel. That you made."

"Are the things we made any good?" Johnny asked.

Bobby's hand flew to his chest with mock offense. "You dare? In my home? The home of my parents? Challenge their creative endeavors in baking? You dare doubt their brilliant recipes? The ones you've eaten for years?"

Johnny looked away, down at the floor. "Sorry."

Bobby laughed. "You didn't have to try the salsa cupcakes. Those were nasty. Too spicy and they didn't set right. Nah, these ones all looked like they'd work. Mom and Dad cleared them for bulk making and testing. They only make the weird stuff in the other kitchen."

Tommy pushed himself up and looked at Johnny. "Are you going to at least try to look nice on Valentine's Day?"

"Don't I always look nice?"

Tommy frowned.

"He means *nicer*. Effort," Dutch said. "You know, something that shows off your...*assets*."

Johnny did not like the way he said that. Didn't like where this was going. Like he was some rich ladies purebred poodle about to go to show.

"I'm trying to remember what Johnny's got in his closet," Jimmy hummed.

"Can't do the red jacket," Tommy said.

"What's wrong with my jacket?"

"It's good for biking and being cool. But it's...well with the patch is gone..." Jimmy said slowly.

"Oh! What about the green button-up? Has Daniel seen that yet?" Tommy asked.

"Yeah, I wore it to dinner at his house."

"Wait," Dutch said sitting up suddenly. "You had dinner at his house and didn't tell us? The hell Johnny, next we know you're going to say you already kissed and yet still have cold feet."

Johnny looked away.

"The HELL! Johnny I'm going to murder you," Dutch said landing a punch on Johnny's leg. "Seriously! How can we help you if you're keeping shit from us?"

"It doesn't count. And I don't talk about this stuff."

Dutch rolled around on the floor muttering curses covering his face with his hands. "Someone else, someone else do it. I can't, I will kill him."

Bobby leaned close, too close and Johnny scooted back until he hit the cabinets. He turned to scoot further down but Jimmy was there, blocking his way.

"I don't talk about this," he repeated.

"Yeah," Bobby said. "We get that. Dutch always pressed about Ali. He's a bit of a perv. You like to respect your partner's privacy. I get that. Very noble. But you keep saying Daniel doesn't like you. So if you've kissed it's for sure going to make us think maybe just maybe you've fallen and hit your head something damn awful." Bobby slapped his hand into the cabinets next to Johnny's head. "Did you fall and hurt

yourself recently Johnny? Huh?"

Johnny usually wasn't on this end of this version of Bobby. Dutch usually was. Sometimes Jimmy or Tommy was. But never Johnny. He was cornered. He was stuck. There wasn't any escape.

"He was drunk. It didn't count. Drunk kisses never count," Johnny said sourly.

It was his only way out.

He wouldn't go into details.

Bobby blinked looking at Jimmy with a frown.

"Johnny doesn't really take advantage of drunk..." Jimmy said slowly.

"Daniel kissed you!" Tommy said popping up from the floor.

"He was drunk," Johnny said slowly.

"Wait, when was Daniel drunk? At the dinner you had? He drunkenly, kiss you good night?" Dutch called. He'd gotten up and was opening the fridge, peering in. He grabbed a fruit bowl and set the bowl down and sat down on a stool, tossing grapes into his mouth.

"The dinner was a thing his mother wanted us to do. So my mother and I went. I wore the green shirt and we ate her home-cooked food. It was really good."

"Better than the lasagna?" Dutch asked.

"Good as, but more. Lots more," Johnny said, hoping they kept talking about the dinner and not circling back.

"Damn I want to eat more of Mrs. LaRusso's cooking," Jimmy said. "That lasagna was delightful."

Bobby snapped his fingers in front of Johnny's face. "Nope. Focus. You're not leading us down a food rabbit hole."

"The party," Tommy said. "Isn't that when Daniel got super drunk and Johnny had to drive him home? We couldn't find Johnny or Daniel most of the night. And! Daniel was pissed when we thought he and Ali did it. Told us not to spread rumors."

Damn. All those detective novels Tommy read.

He was grinning at Johnny.

"I'm right aren't I?"

He was too pleased with himself. Too damn observant.

"So Daniel sees Ali, gets his heartbroken, gets drunk, finds Johnny, kisses him? That what we're going with?" Jimmy asked.

"Based on his face?" Bobby said studying Johnny in that annoying way he did. "Yeah."

"So what's the problem?" Dutch asked, flicking a grape at them. Bobby caught it and glared at Dutch. Dutch looked away.

They were quiet. Waiting for Johnny to speak. He frowned.

"Drunk means nothing." He said softly, pushing himself up. "Ali sometimes kissed other people when she was drunk. It's why...I thought they'd work it out."

"Don't know how to break this to you bud, but Ali and Daniel are not the same people," Dutch said tossing a grape high up in the air and leaning back to catch it. He did and grinned, satisfied. "Some people, show their true colors when they're drunk. Like you."

Johnny felt his face flush bright red. "Yeah? What kind of drunk am I?"

"Sad," Dutch said. "And sweet."

Johnny frowned, looking at them.

"You're very hands-on," Bobby said with a soft smile. "Lots of hugs. Lots of things you don't normally say."

"It's why we honestly didn't hate how much you drank at the lodge. Why we suffered and still bought you that stupid drink," Jimmy said. "Because, unlike Dutch, you wouldn't strip or want to challenge the poor bartender to an arm wrestle. You, we have to pick up off the floor as soon as you stand, and you're a miserable man when hungover. Just whiny and full of curses. But there's no heat in it. And on the way back to the lodge you always told us how you feel."

"Just go back to fixing my terrible wardrobe problems will you?" Johnny said burying his face in his hands. Told them how he felt. About what? What kind of embarrassment was he to himself?

Tommy laughed. "Maybe you could borrow Bobby's flannel."

"Oh, now that's an idea. If we open up our closets we could definitely get him in something nicer," Jimmy said turning to Tommy.

"Oh god, what is this?" Johnny groaned.

"What? It's what they always do in the movies," Tommy said with a grin.

"A makeover? Seriously? That's where you're going?"

"I'm down," Dutch said with a grin. "Something that makes his eyes pop, and shows off the guns."

"I hate you all."

"According to drunk you, you don't," Bobby said patting his arm and standing.

Johnny groaned.

"They've cooled. We make the icing now. And then later we can go through my closet and see what fits Johnny."

Johnny helped to make icing and glazes and they decorated the things they made. When they were done Johnny thought it was about time to go home. Wondered if he could sneak out.

But instead found himself sitting on the floor in Bobby's room while the guys raided Bobby's closet, holding things up to Johnny and throwing things in a yes pile or a no pile.

Bobby's room was normally neat, and they were destroying it. Johnny half expected Bobby to put an end to it. But he looked amused. He was commenting. He was helping destroy his own room.

Some things were too casual.

Others too fancy.

Not enough asset showing. Whatever the hell that meant.

Johnny was half tempted to just lay down and fall asleep. He started to nod off but a shirt was thrown at him and he started awake.

"Dude, we got to see if it makes your eyes look nice."

What was wrong with his friends?

He wondered if they'd get pissed if he just left. Left them all stranded. He was their ride.

He couldn't just leave them all and inflict them upon the Browns.

But damn he was getting close to going to his car and leaving with his bonsai.

A knock came at the door about halfway through Bobby's stupidly large closet. What teenage boy needed so much clothing? It was practically a store.

"Boys, Dinner," Mr. Brown said. "We ordered Chinese food."

"We'll come back to this," Bobby warned, helping Johnny to his feet and pushing him out the door to the dining room.

Were they going to be at this all night?

Ridiculous.

Yes, Valentine's day was the next day but he didn't need to make a big deal about it. They didn't need to make a big deal about it. He liked doing things his own way. And yeah he did forget but he'd been busy.

The Chinese food was nice. The guys talked. The Browns listened but then would get ideas that they'd jot down.

About halfway through, Mrs. Brown lifted her pen. "I put out the extra towels and bedding."

Extra towels? Bedding?

Johnny turned to Bobby with a frown.

"Yeah, you're not going home Johnny. This year *you're* spending the night," Bobby said.

"We all are," Jimmy said.

"But clothes?"

"You're borrowing mine," Bobby said.

"And we packed," Tommy said.

"So you planned this ahead of time?" Johnny asked, voice tight.

"Yup. You're driving us to school tomorrow." Bobby nodded.

Johnny frowned. This really was going to happen all night.

When dinner wrapped up Johnny went and got his bonsai and his go-bag. He didn't want to leave it outside all night.

He protested when they tried to get him to try on clothes. So many clothes. They were too into it. Too amused.

He was relieved when they all agreed on an outfit and when they started nodding off to go to bed.

He showered.

He opened his go bag, pulling out a change of clothes, soft enough to sleep in.

The room was quiet.

All the guys had fallen asleep.

There was a little bit of bedding on the floor for him to sleep in.

Unlike Johnny's bed, Bobby's wasn't big enough to share.

Not without bumping into one another in their sleep.

But the Browns had little foam things they rolled out onto the floor so it was softer for guests.

He slipped out of the room and down through the halls, holding his bonsai.

Johnny made his way to the test kitchen. Heart pounding, hands sweaty. *Show no fear*.

He knocked gently on the kitchen door. Mr. and Mrs. Brown were still hard at work.

"Johnny! What's up? Here try this."

Johnny took the cupcake. He nodded his appreciation after a bite. "Mint?"

"Yes. Great."

"Do you remember the cookies you made, the simple shortbread ones? Uh, a couple of years ago for the summer, with lavender?"

"Oh of course." Mr. Brown said.

"Could," Johnny cleared his throat. "Could I make some?"

Mr. Brown and Mrs. Brown glanced at each other then grinned. Mrs. Brown got up and walked over to a cabinet and jumped up, grabbing a binder off a big shelf. It was messy, full of sticky notes and loose pieces of paper. She flipped through it and Mr. Brown came close.

"No, it's further in the back."

"I thought it was next to the lava cakes."

"No, we moved it, we tried reorganizing by season remember?"

"Oh right. There it is."

She snapped open the binder and pulled out a piece of paper. Mr. Brown took it and handed it over to Johnny. "Everything you need is in the other kitchen. Except, honey, where's the lavender?"

"Here," she said grabbing a jar and passing it over. "Cute tree by the way."

"Uh, thanks. It's a bonsai."

"If you get confused let us know okay? Make yourself at home Johnny. Oh and there are little bags and stuff. Help yourself with storing your cookies, there are also paper boxes. Use what you want."

"Thank you," Johnny said, looking down at the recipe.

It was readable.

Someone had typed it up.

He made his way to the other kitchen and set the bonsai down. He looked at it and smiled softly.

"I used to have a book," he said as he got out all the dry ingredients, all the wet ingredients. "Mom gave it to me. One of her jobs was at a florist, she liked that job, but it went under."

He set the temperature on the oven, glancing at the paper and setting everything out. Organizing it based on what he read.

"Language of flowers. Valentine's day is a lot of red roses, dahlia's, red tulips, carnations. They're romantic. They mean love. But lavender. That's something different."

He opened the jar. He kind of wished he still had his black headband. It was in the box in the back of his closet with his gi, and his patches. He figured no one would want that. Even if he donated it. It'd do no one any good.

He couldn't believe Mr. and Mrs. Brown had just given him the recipe. They hadn't asked him why he wanted to make it.

He'd leave their kitchen nicer than he left it. He'd clean as he went. He'd move slowly. Patiently.

He ground lavender and sugar together with a mortar and pestle. It smelled like the garden. He completed the dough and set it in the fridge. Moved onto the glaze.

Johnny didn't cook a lot. Didn't bake a lot. But he was good at following instructions. And a lot of the unfamiliar terminology Bobby had gone over that afternoon for the cakes and candies they'd made.

He rolled out the cookie dough when it was chilled then looked at the bonsai.

"I got to cut them. But how? And what?"

He frowned.

Hearts were too much.

If he handed anyone a cookie he'd made in the shape of hearts he'd never live it down. Plus it felt too...cheesy.

He looked through the drawers. He knew the Browns had a ridiculous amount of cookie cutters. He found a box and went through it. Basic shapes, hearts, flowers, a circle.

He set the circle aside.

Dinosaurs. Ha, perfect if they were in elementary school. He found Christmas ones, alphabet letters, butterflies, holiday shapes, one of the state of California, a star. He took the star out. Stars and circles. That

was fine. It wasn't perfect. But it was good enough.

He cut out dough, put it on cookie sheets, rerolled, cut again, set those on more cookie sheets. Popped them in the oven and waited.

He cleaned.

He pulled the cookies out when his timer went off. He let them cool, sitting on a stool and resting his cheek on the countertop looking at the bonsai.

"Bobby said I'm scared." He sighed. "I think that's an understatement. Which is silly."

He pressed his forehead into the cool countertop.

"*Fear doesn't live in this dojo*." he imitated, Kreese's voice, a grumble. "It's not that fear doesn't live here. It's that you don't show it. It's all he really wanted. Easy to fake."

He reached out and poked one of the cookies. Still too warm. He wanted to taste it. They looked okay.

He waited.

"I still have that book. Managed to keep it. Think it's the only book we have from before. Used to take it with me when I went to the florist to pick stuff out for Ali. The florist had the same book. Ali didn't actually really care I think. She liked the flowers. The effort. But not the language behind it. Never got my secret messages. I even got her a copy of the same book. But that's okay. I didn't tell her why. Didn't tell her the point. It was more for myself I think."

He poked the cookies again. They were cool.

He sat up, gathering up the glaze, and pouring it carefully over the cookies.

Maybe he was like a kindergartner. It was kind of silly. But he was doing what he wanted.

He picked one up and studied it carefully before taking a bite. It was what he remembered. A taste of spring. Of a garden. He hadn't screwed it up.

He looked around looking for the boxes and bags. He packaged them up carefully. Found a pen, made a note, and stuck it on one of the

boxes that he set in the corner of the kitchen. Then he carefully carried the rest out to the trunk of his car. He scrubbed everything in the kitchen down and returned the recipe to the Browns.

He thanked them, not just for the recipe but for dinner and having them over. They smiled.

He went back to Bobby's room and went to bed.

Johnny woke up early, folding up his bedding and getting ready. He woke up the guys.

Only Bobby responded.

"I'm going to school now. If you want a ride, your chariot's leaving in a half-hour."

Bobby groaned looking at his alarm clock. "Johnny it's 6 am."

Johnny was adjusting the deep blue flannel they'd decided on. "I got stuff to do this morning." He glanced around. They weren't moving. He sighed. "Fine, I'll come back and get you. Be ready by 7:30. Like outside."

"You're an alien," Bobby complained, grabbing his pillow and shoving it back over his head. "A different planet where people don't sleep."

Johnny grabbed his stuff and headed out the door. He hoped in the Avanti and headed out to Reseda. He pulled into the parking lot and popped the trunk, picking out one of his boxes, with one of his notes.

He spotted the truck and grabbed another and headed towards the apartment complex.

That saved him time. He set one outside of room #20.

He couldn't sneak one to Mr. Miyagi.

Mr. Miyagi glanced up surprised.

"Very early Johnny-san."

"Yeah, I'm running uh gifts. For you, as thanks," Johnny said passing him a box of cookies. "I made them. They're lavender cookies."

"Lavender," Mr. Miyagi repeated taking the box. He smiled softly. "Calming flower. Many meanings."

Johnny nodded. "Have a good rest of your day. I got to drop off another."

Johnny hurried back to his car and drove home.

He knew his mother was up.

She got up early on Valentine's Day because Sid always did something ridiculous. One year he flew her to Paris.

She always had to drink her coffee first. Mental prepare herself.

He walked into the kitchen through the back door and she stood in her robe, hair done and her make-up already finished as she drank her coffee, leaning against the counter.

She turned and smiled at him.

"Oh, I like this look."

"You can thank Bobby and the guys," Johnny said.

She cupped the side of his face with a smile. "Got anything up your sleeves today?"

He held out a box. She glanced surprised but smiled, she flicked it open and grinned. "Cookies?"

"Lavender."

"Ah, how sweet. Devotion." She kissed his forehead and then popped one in her mouth. "I hope you have some fun today."

He smiled. "Good luck to you."

She laughed. "I think we're going to brunch somewhere ridiculous."

Johnny glanced at the clock. "I got to go pick up the guys. Love you."

"Love you."

They were standing around outside Bobby's house when Johnny returned to get them.

"7:30 on the dot," Bobby said shaking his head looking at his watch before opening his door. He frowned. "What's that?"

"Your gift."

"*My* gift?"

"Yeah."

Bobby glanced into the back seat where three more boxes sat. "Did you chicken out?"

"Do you *not* want the cookies I made last night?" Johnny asked leaning over to reach for the box.

Bobby snatched it up. "Oh don't you dare try and take my cookies back."

Johnny smirked.

"Wait, you made these?" Dutch asked through a mouthful, already digging in.

Johnny checked that they had their seatbelts on and headed off the familiar way to school.

"Yeah."

"When?"

"While you were all sleeping."

"Why don't you ever seem to sleep?" Bobby said.

"Did you make some for Daniel?" Tommy asked.

"Yes."

Bobby nodded. "So you didn't want to give him any of the cakes we made yesterday?"

"No," Johnny said then glanced at Bobby. "But, uh, thanks for setting that up. For reminding me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Bobby looked pleased, he popped open the box. "Are these my parent's lavender cookies?"

"I borrowed the recipe."

"Good choice."

Pity

Determination was something Daniel had in spades.

He'd made truffles, spent the week going over the recipe his mother had, making adjustments. She took all of the samples to work. Helped him by taste testing and giving him advice. And he was pretty proud of what they'd come up with.

At school on Valentine's Day, he tried to figure when the best time was to give them to Johnny.

He was so singularly focused that he was caught off guard when he saw Ali at Johnny's locker.

Talking to him.

Leaning against the lockers, holding her folders to her chest.

The way she tucked her hair behind her ear and looked up at him.

He reminded himself that she was dating the football player.

But they looked like they were at ease with one another while Johnny was opening his locker.

A flood of colorful paper.

Hundreds of envelopes slid to the floor around his feet.

Johnny looked startled and Ali started laughing.

He stooped down to pick them all up, brows furrowed as he set them carefully back in his locker in a little pile.

There wasn't enough space. He dumped them into his bag.

Ali was still talking.

Johnny nodded.

She reached out and touched his arm, just above the elbow.

Left it there too long.

Daniel was not in a good place to give Johnny his truffles. His hands

were in fists, his jaw too tight.

He turned, he walked to his class, slamming his locker a little harsher than he meant.

He calmed down in class.

Thought about handing it over then.

But girls swarmed Johnny's desk.

Johnny kept shooting looks at Tommy who gave him a shrug.

Daniel put the truffles back in his bag.

At lunch, Bobby gave them all heart-shaped cupcakes.

They were delicious.

Johnny held his bag in his lap and kept zipping it and unzipping it, fiddling with it.

He was too distracted.

They all had their own pile of treats.

Things girls at the school had given them.

It was like Halloween.

Like kids going through their spoils from the night.

They offered to share with Daniel.

But Daniel didn't want it. It was a stark reminder of how little the girls liked him.

But that was fine.

He didn't care about the girls. It just hurt his pride.

He was running out of time.

Johnny was busy in the halls.

Girls kept giving him stuff.

He'd have to do something else.

He'd have to come up with something else.

When school was over he shot straight to the Avanti.

He waited for Johnny.

For Johnny to go collect his bonsai from wherever his new hiding spot was.

Daniel had peeked into the greenhouse shortly after the first time he'd found Johnny in there, and the bonsai was gone.

He'd worried that someone had stolen it.

Nearly tore the greenhouse apart only for the teacher to find him and chew him out.

He didn't know how he had the worst luck with the teachers misunderstanding him. But he did.

Then he'd seen Johnny with it. Realized Johnny had hidden it elsewhere.

There.

Blonde in tight blue flannel, so blue Daniel could see his eyes, bright and blue from across the parking lot.

The bonsai was sticking out of his bag.

His bag was full.

"Hey. Need a ride?" Johnny asked.

Yes.

"No," Daniel said.

Johnny sat his bag down and very carefully put the bonsai in the passenger seat and carefully pulled out a box. He ran his thumbs over it, staring at it before turning to Daniel.

"Here," Johnny said.

Daniel took it.

He was sharing some of the millions of sweets the girls had given him.

Cookies.

Homemade.

Ouch.

Poor girl.

Daniel wavered.

His Mom would be upset if he didn't.

Johnny was zipping up his bag and setting it on the back seat.

He had a small smile on his face.

He looked pleased. Probably from getting hundreds of treats.

From the girls suddenly flooding back.

From Ali flirting with him as if nothing had ever happened.

What an ego boost. Daniel wouldn't know.

Daniel opened his bag and took out the small box of truffles.

"Johnny," Daniel said.

Johnny turned and Daniel put the box in his hands.

He was losing his nerve.

The millions of things he wanted to say.

It was all jumbling up.

His heart was pounding in his ears.

His fingers were touching Johnny's and that was fine, that was normal.

He touched Johnny all the time. Not the way he wanted. Hmm. Nope. Needed to reel his brain back in.

"Ma's got this recipe."

Oh god, why did he mention his mother?

"She got it from this chocolatier in New York."

This wasn't what he meant to say.

"I made some. Er. I made these."

Run.

Oh god.

What a fool he'd made of himself.

He turned quickly, retreating to the Ford.

He slammed the door and hurried home.

He popped the box of cookies open.

Pity cookies.

Might as well eat them.

He didn't like wasting food.

He ate one.

It was weird.

It was floral.

He sniffed it.

Were they actually cookies? Was he eating soap?

What girl made these?

His truffles were better.

His mother was home early from work.

He flopped down on the couch, putting his leg up.

He was annoyed.

He held the box of cookies on his chest.

Of course, Johnny was drowning in Valentine's Day gifts.

Why had he even bothered?

What had Ali talked to Johnny about?

Had the UCLA guy just been an excuse to break up with Daniel?

To try and go back to Johnny?

It was all a joke.

He angrily bit into one of the cookies.

"Oh I see you got some too," Lucille said.

Daniel looked up at her confused.

"The cookies Johnny made. They're kind of nice. Lavender shortbread. He left me the sweetest note. Did you read your note?" Lucille asked, holding up a familiar-looking box.

Daniel coughed, scrambling to sit up and looking closer at the box. Sure enough, there was a tiny note.

He unfolded it carefully.

Daniel,

I'm not good at baking. Or cooking. Not nearly as good as I'm sure you are. Or your mother is.

But I wanted to try. As thanks. For being with me these last few months. For giving me a second chance.

For being there. They're lavender cookies. One of my favorites. They remind me of spring.

Happy Valentine's Day.

Yours,

Johnny

Daniel flushed red.

Yours.

He should've included a note with his truffles.

It was so innocent.

So sweet.

Oh god.

He'd been so rude when accepting them.

He was keeping this note forever.

Wait, his mother got one?

What did her note say?

No, he didn't want to know.

His mother was laughing. He looked at her.

"You didn't know they were from Johnny did you?" she asked.

"No. He got like a million things from girls today. I thought he was just sharing," Daniel said.

He looked down at the box with a feeling of regret.

He should've savored them.

He wouldn't eat any more today.

"I thought they were soap at first."

"Soap that you ate?" Lucille was laughing.

Daniel wrinkled his nose. "I thought I'd just give it a try anyway."

"Did you give Johnny your truffles?"

"I did."

"Good. My coworkers loved all that I gave them. They were a hit."

He nodded, looking at the box.

There were still several left.

Little speckles of purple mixed in.

Circles and stars, and as he shifted the box.

One heart.

He'd save that one.

Eat it last.

Bad Karma

Ali was talking to Johnny again. And it was weird.

The girls were back too.

Tommy had just shrugged when he'd asked.

The rumors hadn't worked.

Tommy didn't know why.

He was opening his locker and there she was. Grinning up at him, like the past 7 or so months hadn't happened.

Like she hadn't ripped his heart out and stomped on it.

Like he hadn't tried to pull her back to him, tried to demand she give him a reason that she never did.

Like he hadn't hurt Daniel. Like she hadn't dated Daniel.

"I think you're a liar Johnny Lawrence," she said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said putting his things in his locker.

"There *was* a rumor going around. That Johnny Lawrence liked someone. But," she shrugged her shoulders following him to their shared class. "I haven't seen Johnny-boy make a move. On *any* young lady at our school. And I *know* you strike first. It's who you are."

"I don't do Cobra Kai anymore," Johnny said.

"A tiger can't change his stripes."

"I'm not a tiger."

"Who do you like Johnny? I can help." She was talking sweetly. Sugary.

Like nothing had ever happened. Like they were just friends from the country club.

Johnny really didn't need any more help. The guys were bad enough. His mom was bad enough. He felt like he finally had everything under

control.

It wasn't her business. Not anymore.

He sighed. "Ali, I appreciate it. I do. But I'm not going to talk about it."

She laughed. "And *that*, is exactly why I don't think you actually like anyone. I think you're still licking your wounds. If you're not going to tell me then I'm going to keep telling the girls that you're free and up for grabs."

"Can you not?"

It was such a headache. The girls, Ali. He wanted to just be left alone.

But she wouldn't understand. Wouldn't get why he was tired of it.

"A *name* Johnny."

He shook his head.

"Then the girls are going to be delighted. Really Johnny, just go on a few dates. Have some fun. You'll find the right girl for you eventually."

She walked past his seat and he frowned.

She sounded just like her Mom.

The last couple of times he'd gone to the country club Mrs. Mills had asked him if he was seeing anyone new. When he shook his head she grabbed his elbow and started introducing him to the other girls his age.

"You just need to find the right girl," she said.

He had a feeling she felt bad about Ali. But she'd accepted the football player as a good trade-up. And Johnny was just a loose end she needed to tie up.

Ali would hate him for the rest of his life if he told her that. That she was acting just like her mother.

He was tempted. She'd give him the silent treatment again.

It became a thing.

As the weeks progressed into spring.

As the school talked about spring break.

Ali was just around again.

Not at their table.

She still seemed to be out of sorts with Daniel.

But she kept coming back to his locker.

"You coming to the country club?" Ali asked.

"I've got plans."

"You have plans? What could you possibly be doing?"

"Working."

"You have a job? Seriously? How much do you make?"

"Nothing."

She blocked his path as he turned to go to his class. "Wait, you're volunteering?"

"I don't call it that...but I guess so."

"Where? How often?"

Johnny frowned walking around her.

She fell in step beside him.

"It depends. Sometimes I help out Mr. Miyagi. Other nights I babysit. Some nights I work at an animal sanctuary."

"Damn, I should've thought of something like that for my college applications."

"Your college applications will be fine, Dr. Mills."

She looked so delighted when he said that.

He was surprised it doesn't make his heart pound the way it used to.

That it had the opposite effect it used to. It left a bitter taste in his mouth, a souring in his stomach.

She made it seem easy. Like nothing.

The Friday before spring break, after school Daniel met him in the parking lot.

"You free?" Daniel asked.

Daniel seemed to be uneasy.

Shifting around.

Too much nervous energy.

"Where do you want to go?" Johnny asked.

He already has his bonsai.

"I just want to talk," Daniel said.

"Where?" Johnny asked.

Daniel looked around at their classmates pooling out of the school.

He was too quiet again.

Worrying at his lower lip as he looked around.

Full of thought.

Thinking of what he was going to say. It made Johnny nervous.

Every single time.

Talkative Daniel was better.

Their classmates were leaving, the parking lot was emptying out.

"Here I guess," Daniel said.

Johnny nodded dropping his bag in the Avanti. He set the bonsai in the passenger seat and leaned against the side of his car.

"You okay?"

It was like poking a balloon with a needle.

"It's none of my business." Daniel started, looking at the ground. "So you can just tell me to shut up. But it's driving me nuts."

Johnny waited.

"How'd you get Ali to talk to you again?"

Johnny blinked.

Right.

Of course.

"I apologized to her."

"What? Why? When?" Daniel turning towards Johnny surprised.

"After the party, I saw her at the country club and I apologized for everything I did."

Daniel frowned, turning back to the parking lot, he was chewing it over then he whirled back, eyes wide.

"After the party! You mean after I kissed you. You realized what it's like to have someone kiss you who you didn't want to kiss them. You apologized *because* of me. Because I- I disgusted you that much that you learned your lesson."

He was speaking too fast, eyes too wide, backing away.

"Daniel, that's not- you were drunk," Johnny said pushing away from the Avanti quickly. "That's not why-"

"No. I get it. Yeah, sorry for that man," Daniel said, he was rushing to his Ford.

Johnny was trying to figure out how to respond.

He hurried after him.

"Daniel, I-"

"Hey, don't worry about it."

The door was shutting.

"We never talked about it. I figured you just were being nice. That...maybe... But it's all been a joke, right? Be friends with Daniel, but laugh about him right? Don't actually be friends with him, except because of guilt. Consider your guilty conscience cleared. You don't

got to do anything else. Community service project done."

His voice was so bitter. So final. Eyes hard.

"Daniel, it's not like that," Johnny's voice was full of panic.

The Ford was backing up.

Turning.

Daniel wasn't looking at him.

"Daniel!" Johnny called but the Ford was speeding out of the lot.

Daniel didn't look back.

Johnny ran back to his Avanti.

He jumped over the side and in, grabbing his keys.

If he hurried maybe he could catch him.

Maybe he could explain.

Maybe he could figure out how he fucked up.

He didn't know how but he had to have.

He *always* did.

He liked that kiss.

But maybe they should've talked about it.

They probably should've talked about it.

Why hadn't he talked about it?

He just hadn't wanted to take advantage.

He looked around.

He didn't know which way Daniel had disappeared in.

He slammed his hand against the wheel.

He brought the palms of his hands to his eyes.

They were wet.

He brushed away tears and drove.

He'd keep an eye out for that yellow car.

The banana boat.

He'd find it.

He drove for a while.

It wasn't sitting outside Seven Seas, he couldn't see it at Mr. Miyagi's, it wasn't a Golf 'n Stuff.

Eventually, he stopped, because it was getting hard to see.

He parked next to the beach, grabbed the bonsai, and walked out towards the water sinking into the sand.

He bowed his head over the bonsai.

He sat until the tears stopped.

Hugging the bonsai to his chest.

He knew where he was.

He always knew where he was in LA.

If he walked a couple of blocks down there was a bar.

A bar that didn't card.

A bar owned by Jimmy's cousins.

He had his wallet.

He grabbed his bag from the Avanti, put the hood up, locked it and started walking.

The bar was dark and music played.

He sat down at the bar, in the corner and ordered a beer.

He had a tab.

The last time he'd been there was the night Ali broke up with him.

He laughed.

He wasn't even dating Daniel and it felt the same.

He drank.

He put his bag against the wall with the bonsai in it.

His glass was empty.

He ordered another.

The bonsai was judging him. He tried to cover it so it couldn't see him. Then he felt silly. Plants didn't have eyes. Then he worried about the bonsai being able to breathe. Then he panicked quickly unzipping his bag again.

"Sorry," he whispered.

He placed his hand on the pot, feeling the cool ceramic.

His glass was empty. He ordered another.

The bartender walked to the other side of the bar.

He tried to remember his name. Jimmy's cousin. Could not remember his name. He felt bad. He should've known his name.

"Hey, Johnny."

Johnny turned.

There were three Bobby's standing next to him. He picked one.

"Hey," he said.

He couldn't remember how many he'd had. But he passed the glass forward to the bartender and tapped.

"What happened?"

"Do you know about karma?" Johnny asked. "When I was a kid. I read this book and this character mentioned how something was bad karma. I think it was stepping on ants. Bad karma. I hadn't heard of it. So I checked a book out at the library. It was a little difficult to get. But what I did get was...the idea...that your actions affect your future life, your next life. And your past actions affected this one. It wants

you to put good things into the world because the good you put out comes back to you. Bad things, likewise. I think...I must've been the most evil mother fucker in my last life."

"Oh Johnny," Bobby said in that tone.

He was sitting down next to Johnny.

Johnny's hand was wet. His vision was blurry. He rubbed his eyes. He was crying. He laughed. It was watery.

"I never say the right thing. I can't do the right thing. I don't trust the right people. I'm surprised I wasn't reincarnated into a mosquito. Would've been less cruel. In my next life. I'll probably be a cicada. And not even one that gets to mate. One that's eaten as soon as it pops its head up in the summer."

He picked up his drink. He looked down into the amber liquid.

Jimmy's family always made good beer.

"He's told me that five times," the bartender was telling Bobby. He looked at Johnny. "Glad you like it, Johnny."

Johnny didn't remember saying it aloud but nodded.

"Could you call Jimmy? Tell him to be here in like an hour? I'm joining him. A beer for me as well," Bobby said.

"Your life," Johnny said looking at Bobby, if he squinted he could see one of them. "Is alien to me. Like what do you want to *be* Bobby?"

"I'm thinking of studying religion. I kind of want to be a pastor."

Johnny wrinkled his nose. "Doesn't that mean you can't get married? Or laid? That doesn't seem like you."

Bobby laughed. "Pastors can get married. It's not like a monk or something like that. How's my life alien to you? We're best friends."

Johnny looked down into his drink again. He could make out a wavering reflection of himself and he didn't like it.

"I think a lot of Mr. Miyagi's karate is balance. I don't know for certain. But like balancing life." Johnny turned and poked Bobby's shoulder. "Your life is balanced."

Bobby frowned. "Hey, did something happen with Mr. Miyagi?"

"No. Mr. Miyagi is so nice. How do you live that long and stay kind? I want to be like him. But I don't think it's in my nature. His family *died* Bobby. His wife. His son. But he's still kind. He went to war. Like Kreese. But he's still kind. Kind to me. *Me*. I wasn't nice. But he's nice to me. I hurt Daniel and he's still kind to me. I don't get it. But I just add it to the pile of things I don't get."

His glass was empty. He passed it to the bartender.

"Is it Kreese?" Bobby whispered, voice soft next to him.

Johnny laughed. "No. You know. I thought Sid was right. Sid told me, the next time I spoke back, backtalked, I'd die. I learned my lesson *that* time. But I forgot. Because it was Kreese. Because I expected him to be different. But he was the same. In the end. Just like Sid. Only useful until I'm not. I don't know how to be useful to everyone. But I'm trying. To be helpful. Because I want to keep people in my life. My friends. My mom. Mr. Miyagi. Daniel. But I can't think of how to be better. More useful. I don't want to be tossed aside again."

Bobby's hand sat on top of Johnny's. Johnny looked at him.

Bobby looked pissed.

"No," Bobby said, holding Johnny's hand tightly.

Too tightly.

"No Johnny. That's not how life is supposed to work. Your relationships aren't based on usefulness. You're not disposable. Do you understand me? We're not your friends because you're useful to us. Who the hell- Sid. Fuck Sid. Listen, Johnny, listen to me, okay. You're stuck with me. Okay? Like a fucking barnacle. Best friends. For life. And I know the other guys feel the same. They show it in their own ways. Why do you think we never wanted to skip without you?"

Johnny looked down at his glass. "Because you like my Avanti."

Bobby burst out laughing.

"Oh, Johnny. You could drive some awful piece of shit and we'd still not want to skip without you. It's because we're friends. Because it's not fun without you. Because when you're not around we miss you."

Johnny puzzled that over in his head.

He looked at the bonsai.

He pressed his hand against the pot.

He laid his arm out on the bar and rested his head on his arm and took a deep breath.

Everything smelled like beer.

"Daniel wanted to talk."

Bobby was looking at him, that look that could see through him.

Johnny closed his eyes.

"He wanted to know why Ali was talking to me. I told him I apologized to her. He asked when. I told him after the party. He got the wrong idea. Thought I...thought I learned my lesson. About forcing a kiss on her. One she didn't want. And I learned because Daniel corned me and kissed me while he was drunk. He didn't listen. He said my community service project is done. I don't know what that means. I don't have to be his friend out of guilt. He drove away," Johnny looked at Bobby. "I don't know how to fix it. He didn't want to see me anymore. We're not even dating."

"I'm going to have words with that boy," Bobby grumbled.

Johnny watched him wave to the bartender.

Johnny closed his eyes.

He hadn't meant to tell so much.

Too much.

But he felt better.

A little better.

The bartender heaved a phone onto the counter in front of Bobby.

"What's Daniel's number?" Bobby asked turning his eyes on Johnny.

Johnny frowned. "Don't drunk call Daniel. What if his mom answers?"

Bobby frowned. "I'm not drunk."

"How many have you had?"

Bobby started counting on his fingers, staring hard at them. He frowned. Started over. "Wait, give me a moment."

"Too many," Johnny said.

"What was your plan?" Bobby asked sounding frustrated.

"Gonna sleep on the beach," Johnny said. "Warm enough."

"You are *not* going to sleep on the beach."

"Well, I'm not going home."

"We'll go to my place."

"I'm not going to be a burden to Mr. and Mrs. Brown."

"What does that mean?"

"'m drunk," Johnny said turning his head away.

"Is this that useful crap? Is this why you never come over?"

Johnny didn't look at him.

Bobby kicked his stool. Kept kicking it until he turned back.

"Parents like easy," Johnny said. "Easier if I can be charming. Nice. Not around. People like that more. Spend too much time with Ali, poof. Too much time with Daniel. Poof."

Bobby frowned. "What about me then?"

"Somethings wrong with you. You'll get there eventually. I've reached acceptance."

"Are you going through the 7 stages of grief right now? Drunk as hell in this bar? Seriously?"

"Only way I survive."

"I'm going to kill Daniel."

"You will do no such thing. I messed up. Just can't figure out how. But

I'll tell you when I do," Johnny said letting his forehead rest on the cool bar. His voice was muffled.

"Damn. What the hell happened?" Jimmy's voice said.

"You gotta drive us home," Bobby said. "But first you gotta call Daniel. Johnny says I'm too drunk."

"The hell?"

Bobby kept talking and Johnny focused on his breath. He reached out his hand and put it against the pot of the bonsai again. Let his fingers hang over, touching the dirt, the top of the roots, the bark.

"...too angry. I wanna fight. Bite something."

"Yeah, I figured. Hold on a second."

Johnny glanced over.

Jimmy was going through his jacket pockets. He pulled out a packet of Twizzlers and handed them to Bobby. "...said you were getting pissy. Said Johnny was crying and you were pissed."

Johnny shut his eyes.

"Tell him he's a bastard."

"I'm not going to tell him that."

"Tell him I'm gonna kick his ass for making Johnny cry."

"Also not going to tell him that. Can you even remember what Johnny told you?"

"What bastard starts a conversation then jumps to conclusions and then runs away without hearing the response?"

"Daniel ran away? Bobby can you chew with your mouth closed. That's disgusting man."

A hand slapped Johnny's back. "Didn't let him say like anything. He drove around, tried to find 'em. Ended up at the beach."

"Beach is close. That explains how he ended up here. Listen. I'm going to go into the back. Then we'll go. You can crash at mine, from the looks of both of you."

"I got money. Could take taxi," Johnny offered, peeling his face from bar. "I took a taxi home."

"Yeah, no, you're not going near a cab," Jimmy said. "Let me just call home.

"Call Daniel," Bobby said waving his packet of Twizzlers, mouth full.

"And tell him what, Johnny's sitting at our family bar crying?"

"Not crying."

Jimmy gave him a look.

Johnny blinked and touched his face.

"Not anymore," he muttered.

"Just stay here. Bobby keep an eye on Johnny. Don't let him wander off. Can you do that?"

Bobby raised a hand to his forehead and gave a drunken salute.

He turned back and looked at Johnny.

Johnny stared back.

"Wasn't Jimmy here?"

"Yeah."

"Where'd he go?"

"Call."

"Who?"

"Daniel."

"Why?"

"Tell him off."

"Why?"

"He left you."

"He didn't...he...was upset."

Bobby reached out and patted the top of Johnny's head.

"Want a Twizzler?"

"Yeah."

After a while, Jimmy came back.

"Okay, that's done. Can you both stand? When we get home. I'm calling in the cavalry. Damage control."

"Jimmy. When'd you get here? I missed you. Where'd you go?"

"Damn Johnny this is almost lodge level drinking."

"He's hurt. Be gentle," Bobby said sternly, standing.

Jimmy lifted his hands that had been reaching to help Johnny stand. "The hell? Daniel hurt him? Where's he hurt?"

"*Inside*," Bobby said, tapping his own chest.

Jimmy rolled his eyes and helped Johnny up. "Johnny man, get your bag, your bonsai. Actually, fuck. You drop that thing and you're gonna shatter with it. I'll get the bonsai. Bobby, you get Johnny."

"Why's Jimmy here?" Johnny asked Bobby as Bobby slung an arm under his. He leaned on Bobby and followed him out the door.

"We can't drive. Too drunk."

"Right."

Bobby opened the back door to Jimmy's car and put his hand on top of Johnny's head, gently pushing him into the car. Johnny flopped onto the back seat and Bobby pushed his feet in and shut the door.

Johnny shut his eyes.

The doors opened and shut several times and then they started moving.

It was dark out. He felt a little queasy.

"Did you eat anything?" Jimmy asked.

"No."

"We'll eat at my house," Jimmy said.

Johnny bolted up. "We have to go back."

"What?"

"My-"

"Johnny on the floor next to you is your bonsai and your bag. See them?" Jimmy asked.

Johnny squinted in the darkness, laying back down. It was his bag, his keys to the Avanti, his walkman, and his bonsai. "Yeah," he said with a breath of relief. He rolled onto his side.

"Did you tell him he's a dick?" Bobby asked ripping into a twizzler.

"No. I didn't call him."

"Should've."

"And then Johnny would've been more upset in the morning."

"Did you talk to him?"

"Who? Johnny or Daniel?"

"Daniel."

"No."

"What a waste."

"Bobby."

"Daniel doesn't seem to realize how fragile Johnny is. And I'm...I'm gonna kick his ass."

"Sure you are Bobby."

"I am!"

"You do realize Daniel probably thinks Johnny is tough as nails."

Bobby looked back at Johnny. "Impossible. I'm going to kick his ass."

Johnny blinked at him. He was sleepy.

"Listen. We're going to get to my place. I'm going to call your parents and tell them you're spending the night. And then we're going to eat. And you're going to bed. Straight to bed Bobby Brown."

"Who are you, my mom?"

"Don't sass me."

"Isn't it fucked up?"

"What?"

"You're calling my parents. We always call our parents. Heck Daniel called his mother. We never call Johnny's."

Jimmy didn't respond, pulling into the drive of the mansion and parked the car in the garage. "Yeah," he said quietly.

The doors opened. Johnny tilted his head back and looked up at Jimmy.

"Hey man. What do you wanna eat?" Jimmy asked picking up Johnny's bag and bonsai.

"Seven Veils Cake."

"What the hell is that? Bobby you got him?" Jimmy called.

Hands found Johnny's ankles and pulled.

Johnny looked down.

Bobby was pulling him out of the car.

Bobby leaned into the car and hooked his arm around Johnny's back, under him, and put his hand on top of his head again, helping him out of the car and to his own unsteady feet.

"Woah there cowboy," Bobby said as Johnny started walking. The ground was swaying, but he tried to keep going.

Bobby caught him, arm going under him.

Jimmy sighed, holding the door open. "This way. At least Daniel fucked you up on the Friday night before spring break. Come on gentleman. This way. Food through this door. Almost there. I've always wondered what the drunk leading the drunker looked like and

now I know. It's absolutely awful if you're sober. Mildly hilarious. Absolutely frustrating as hell. You're both so fucking slow."

Johnny's whole focus was on his feet.

Moving one step in front of the other.

All his life, all he could focus on was moving forward.

One step in front of the other.

Every time he looked up, looked around, the world swayed, and eventually, he'd find himself on the ground.

Every time.

Like a baby deer.

He just couldn't figure out life.

And he was practically an adult now.

A senior in high school.

Still swaying on his feet.

While everyone knew their lives, their plans. Bobby was going to be a priest? Pastor. Ali was going to be a doctor. Johnny was going to...continue trying to walk.

There were steps and he frowned. Steps to get into the house.

"Come on man," Jimmy said. "Almost there."

Bobby had moved from his side to behind him. Hand on his back.

Johnny put his hands on the door frame and stepped, one foot in front of the other, up the stairs and into the house.

Bobby returned to his side. They made their way to the kitchen.

"Real food gentleman, what do you want?" Jimmy asked, setting Johnny's bag and Bonsai down in a safe corner of the counter against a wall so it was protected. "Gotta eat. It's like...yikes. Ten o'clock and I think Johnny you've been at the bar since when?"

"I got there at 7:30," Bobby offered, pushing himself onto one of the

stools.

Bobby made it look easy.

Johnny stared at the stool.

He put his hands on the counter and was so relieved when he didn't fall but sat on his stool.

"Burger," Johnny said. Jimmy always made the best burgers.

"Thank you, glad to be acknowledged," Jimmy said opening one of the big cabinets and opening the fridge hidden inside it. He pulled out some meat from a drawer and some bread.

"You gonna stay there?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah."

"Then I'll make you a burger. Bobby?"

"Burger."

"Bless," Jimmy said relieved.

Johnny watched him work for a bit. It reminded him of being at the lake house. Or at Tommy's beach house. Jimmy at the grill, swatting everyone away while he worked. He took it so seriously. They were divine. Johnny lowered his chin to the marble countertop.

"Johnny."

He blinked his eyes open. A burger was set in front of him and French fries.

"Thanks."

He felt better after he ate. Jimmy kept filling his water glass.

"Thanks."

"Of course."

Johnny turned to Bobby. Tried to remember something important. He kept trying to catch it but it kept fading. He blinked.

"Don't be mean to Daniel."

Bobby frowned.

"Be nice."

Bobby shook his head. "No."

Johnny put his hand on Bobby's arm. "I like Daniel. Be nice."

Bobby frowned. "I'm mad at him."

"Okay. But be nice. Pastor Brown."

Bobby looked away but he was smiling.

"Pastor Brown. Did you guys do confessional? Damn, why'd you not call me sooner?"

"What do you want to be?" Johnny asked blinking at Jimmy.

"A lawyer," Jimmy said.

Johnny finished his burger thinking about Jimmy being a lawyer. And Bobby being a pastor. It was like another world.

"Want another?"

"Yeah."

Like magic, Johnny had another on his plate. He frowned. It was like the beer. He was too drunk.

"Sorry," Johnny said.

"For?"

"Drinking so much."

"Hey, it's fine. You don't do it a lot. And my cousin kinda likes the ego boost."

Johnny looked at Jimmy.

Jimmy laughed.

"You tell him how good the beer is, like every five minutes. And apparently, tell him he's got the best bar in LA. You tell him he's cool."

"He is cool."

"Want to know a secret?"

"What?"

"He also doesn't let you drink too much. Always gives you the shit with the low alcohol content."

"*No*."

"Yeah. Doesn't want you to have to get your stomach pumped."

"Damn."

Jimmy grinned. "Okay. Foods done. Off to bed with you. Come on. Careful getting up. Yeah yeah, I'm getting your bonsai."

Johnny found himself in one of the guest rooms. One with one of the big beds. The extra clothes. The extra toothbrushes.

Jimmy was sitting on the side of the tub.

"Brush your teeth, boys," Jimmy said. "Yup okay, no you don't swallow that shit. What are you five? I hate being sober when you're both drunk. Is this what being a parent is? Hell. I gotta apologize to mine. Are you guys feeling okay? Sick? I already grabbed like a pitcher of water and aspirin. Okay yeah, I'm going to leave you clothes. Change. I'll be back. Don't you dare fall down. If you feel like you're gonna fall, aim for the carpet. Not the damn tile."

Johnny curled up in the bed. He didn't remember getting there, but it was like a beacon. Sleep. A siren call. When was the last time he'd slept?

"Move over," Jimmy said. "I don't trust you two. Okay. Johnny. Look at me."

Johnny looked at him.

"Your bonsai, your bag. They're both over there. See them?"

Johnny glanced to where he was pointing. His bonsai was sitting on top of the dresser. So was his bag.

"I set out your Walkman. In case you want it. It's over here."

Johnny followed where Jimmy was pointing, It was sitting on the bedside table.

"Bobby. Yeah. Hi. Okay. Called your parents. They're fine with it. They know you're here. I'll drive you to pick up your car tomorrow. Cousin's going to keep an eye on it."

"Thanks," Bobby said sinking into the pillows on the other side of the bed.

Jimmy turned off the light. He gently rolled Johnny over into the middle.

"You guys need something wake me up. I don't want you face planting or freaking out because you forgot where you were. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay."

"Good night."

Johnny looked up at the ceiling. Everything was quiet. Calm. But not in a peaceful way. In the hollowed-out, empty way.

He rolled over, burying his head into his pillow.

He didn't want to sleep.

But he also didn't want to be awake.

Re-center

Chapter Notes

> I've decided Spring break is in mid to late March so Daniel had like a month or so to get freaked out by Ali being back. It's usually somewhere between March and April in the USA but depends on the school.

Daniel parked the Ford outside of the brunch place.

The last place he and Ali had been on good terms.

Her car was there.

He couldn't believe he'd panicked and called her. Couldn't believe she agreed to meet.

He pushed the doors open. His hands were sweaty.

She was sitting in the corner, her eyes rose and met his. Her lips were pursed into a line. Flat. She wasn't happy to see him.

He took a deep breath and continued over to her.

Normally he'd make a joke.

But he hadn't slept. He was desperate. He had no one else to turn to.

"I suppose," Ali began picking up her water and taking a sip. "I owe you an apology. For your car. Glad to see it's been repaired."

Daniel blinked and looked out the window at the yellow Ford.

He'd forgotten about it. Too much else had happened.

"Will you hear me out?" Daniel whispered.

"Yeah. You sounded pretty freaked out."

Daniel relaxed a little and took a deep breath and the waiter came over and asked what they wanted.

Daniel never hated a waiter so much in his life.

But he breathed again, put in his order, an omelet, and turned back to

Ali when he left.

"I didn't want our breakup to happen the way it did. I'm so sorry. I thought it should be amicable. I wanted to stay friends."

The waiter had brought her coffee and she was ripping open sugar packets and pouring them in, not saying anything.

"I mean you liked someone else and I...I was realizing I liked someone else."

She stopped, mid-rip of her fifth packet, and looked at him.

He had to push through. Before he lost his nerve. Before she started talking.

"I saw you kiss someone else at the party and it hurt. But more like shock and damaged pride. And I'd already been thinking, maybe we should be friends instead. But I was still upset. Because...well I... never mind. I kissed someone at the party too, okay? So it just felt like it was meant to be. That we *needed* to break up. Clearly, we weren't meant to be dating. But with all of last semester, it felt like we had to if that makes sense? Like after everything. Everything we went through together, that *I* went through. I just thought everyone expected us to stay together. And then I was trying to figure out a good way to talk about it. But I was still hurt. Still confused. And I'm sorry Ali. I fucked up. With you...with..."

"You kissed someone else at the party?" Ali asked, eyes wide.

"I got drunk. I suck at beer pong," he said with a weak laugh.

"One of the college girls? *I know* it's not a girl from our school," Ali said thoughtfully.

It looked like she was trying to solve a math problem. The exact same look when they were studying together.

"I fucked that up too," Daniel said.

"Who?"

Daniel had told himself he'd tell her.

He held out his hand, pinky extended and she laughed. Then saw the serious look on his face.

She sighed and hooked her pinky through his.

"Fine Daniel, I won't tell a soul."

"*Only* Ma knows who I like."

"I get it. Wait so she doesn't know either? Even though you kissed her?"

"I kissed Johnny," Daniel said voice barely a whisper.

Ali stared at him, eyes widening, and then sunk back in her seat, arms crossed and lifting one hand thoughtfully to her lips.

She was processing.

Daniel played with the straw in his drink uneasily.

"Start from the beginning," Ali said.

"The *beginning* beginning or?'

"I swear if you start talking about the first thing you remember from your life in Newark- if you *even* include Newark and it's irrelevant I'm going to smack you. No. And not the damn beach either. Start with Johnny. Who you apparently have a crush on."

Daniel told her.

He started with the tournament. With Johnny handing him the trophy, the way his eyes followed Daniel as he was lifted up in a cheering crowd. How for a moment it made him feel like a god or a king.

How Johnny appeared in Mr. Miyagi's workshop. How scared he'd felt. How he'd slapped away the apology. Mr. Miyagi admonishing him for it. But Johnny had already left.

Going to Johnny's house, hearing what the staff said.

Ali frowned at that but didn't say anything.

Meeting Johnny's mother, how awful that had been. He started on a tangent about the tournament again, because *he still won*, they nearly broke his leg so why couldn't a crane kick count?

Ali snapped her fingers in front of his face.

"*Focus* Daniel," she said.

He talked about the bonsai. How fucked up it was that Johnny thought *Daniel*, **Daniel** of all people might do something to a bonsai. He was like the bonsai prince. How he found Johnny with the bonsai at school and took him to Mr. Miyagi's. Where they talked, where Mr. Miyagi decided to invite Johnny back.

"No, slow down. What happened? You tripped and?"

Daniel told her about how Johnny had caught him when he was being a fool, too excited to show off Mr. Miyagi's backyard. How nice it was to be caught.

Ali nodded.

Their food was brought out. He ate and talked.

How his point of view started to shift.

He talked about practicing on the beach with Johnny. Getting pissed and how Johnny *didn't* fight him.

How pissed he'd been that Johnny offered to take care of his leg and how he scratched him up. How Johnny didn't complain but just ran away as soon as he could. He kept the carhop to himself but told Ali of the doctor's appointment, glossed over lunch, and the way the cobras started closing in around him. How they invited him to the party and how he went to hang out with Ali but kept finding himself with Johnny.

She laughed at 7 minutes in heaven being awkward as hell.

He worked his way through everything, the lodge, the days out and around LA, trips to the zoo with the cobras, the aquarium, the damn sports game they'd dragged him to, dinner, and the movies.

He kept bits and pieces to himself, the way Johnny looked at the snow sculptures, how nice it'd been to teach him to cook even basic things, how he latched onto Johnny in his sleep and helped him calm down from nightmares. How much he held onto Johnny. He kept the things he found precious, the minute details to himself because those were his even if he was hurt.

He complained about the girls surrounding Johnny. Looking down at his plate, admitting to the jealousy of seeing Ali talking to Johnny.

How he watched her acting the same as she had with him.

"You know we're not going to date again right? Johnny or I?" Ali said softly. "We dated for 2 years, knew each other for a year before that. We were kind of friends. Now we're just friends again. You know? I'm not after him. I'm quite happy at the moment."

"I'm glad that you're happy," Daniel said softly.

"It sounds like it's been fun. That you've been having a good time. So what happened?"

Daniel told her. Unable to meet her gaze. Of asking him about Ali. How they'd become friends. Putting two and two together, how this was probably all guilt. Johnny clearing his conscience by being Daniel's friend, by letting him become close. By never bringing up the drunken kiss. And then...leaving him without letting him talk, too panicked to realize what he'd done, that he'd run away until he got home hours later. He buried his head in his hands.

Ali let out a low whistle. "Damn Daniel. I knew you were insecure in relationships but you guys aren't even dating."

"I know," Daniel whined. "I fucked up. But how am I supposed to know? You went from ignoring him and hating both of us to suddenly back at his side. And he apologized for kissing you but he's all guilt-ridden so maybe? He's like...not even in a great place and I just...left him without talking to him. Ali I don't know what to do."

"At least you picked spring break to fuck up. You got some time to figure it out," Ali said taking the last bite of her French toast. "I can help. I'll put him back on the blacklist. So the girls aren't after him. They're trying to get dates set up for prom you know? And the senior field trip. But damn, spring break is a great time to be friends with the cobras," Ali said with a sigh leaning back.

"They usually go to Jimmy's lake house. I'm going to assume you're not invited to that at the moment. They're very...uh...protective," she laughed. "I expected like even though I broke up with Johnny that Tommy would still be my friend. He's in the student council and we've been in the same school together since like preschool. The cold shoulder I got when I broke up with Johnny was like pure ice. He didn't warm up again until all their focus was on you. Guess he could only focus on one person to be pissed at at a time."

She laughed. "Sorry, not really funny huh? But the cobras hold

grudges. Okay, let's think. So you panicked and ran. Bad move. You know that Johnny and I are nothing right? Like on my end. Just friends. And according to all the complaints I hear like all the fucking time, none of the girls had managed to make any headway on securing a date with Johnny. So as far as I know, he's free. Now whether he's going to go for you? I don't know. But him pushing you away while you're drunk? Not talking a drunken kiss? That's his M.O. He *always* does that. Pissed me off. He said, oh it was something sappy, he always said it. What was it?"

She was tapping her finger on the table and then it shot up and pointed at Daniel. "Right! *I want you to remember our kisses.* He's an absolute sap. He looks tough as nails now because of all that muscle and how he shot up like a weed, but he's all romantic and ooey-gooey on the inside. So he doesn't count drunken kisses as *anything*. I tried to keep count, right? As some romantic gesture for this cute idea right? Like, celebrate our 100th kiss or something dorky like that. And he deadpanned that we hadn't had 100 kisses yet because the drunken ones didn't count."

Daniel frowned.

She studied him and her lips quirked into a grin. "Hey, don't get discouraged. Listen okay. If Johnny isn't interested he won't let you that close. Almost every single girl at our school has been kept at arm's length. They haven't even been able to get close enough to attempt to steal a kiss. Drunk or not. Heck, they've challenged themselves to give him a hug, and it's been an absolute failure. It's kind of funny to watch. He dodges out of the way, leaves them hugging air."

She tapped her nail thoughtfully on the table again, head in her other hand. "Now I *know* he likes girls. I mean, we dated for two years. My parents were pissed when I broke up with him. Told me I'd never find a guy like that again. And maybe I won't. But." She shrugged. "I made my choice and I don't love him. We're on different paths. I don't want to be the girl on the back of the cool guy's motorcycle, holding a raw steak to his face because he's gotten into a fight again. But that seems to be something you kind of want. Maybe?"

"Maybe," Daniel mumbled. He didn't say he also wanted to take Johnny's motorcycle and drive it, hadn't mentioned how nice it'd been to drive the snowmobile with Johnny's arms around him. He hoped neither of them got into fights bad enough they'd have to use raw steaks. Didn't think it'd even happen with Mr. Miyagi around.

She smiled. "I don't know if he likes guys. I mean I've only really seen him interact with the cobras. And they're...the weirdest group of guy friends I've ever seen. There was one time I tried to sneak into Johnny's room. I thought we'd have a romantic evening, right? And I open the door and on the other end of the bed was a body and I flipped. Thought he'd stepped out with another girl. Nope. It was Dutch. Told me to stop hitting him. And rolled over so if I wanted I could get in bed as well." She put her hand to her face. "I did but I was so pissed. I wanted to kick him out. I *was* Johnny's girlfriend. I should've been the only one in his bed."

She laughed. "Oh god, it's so funny now. Me pushing Johnny over so I could sleep on his side. So I wouldn't have to be near Dutch. I knew if I slept in the middle I'd kick him out of the bed. I'd just fucking kick him all night on purpose. And elbow him. I learned they all did it. They'd never tell me why. They just spent the night with Johnny. Johnny said it was because they were too drunk or too high or like got into a fight. But I doubted that. It felt...more like they were standing guard. But I never understood that. Maybe they are close enough now that I think about it that it blurs the line. Heck, I don't know if they've kissed him while drunk. But they did hang their arms all over him, were constantly touching him. So maybe that's why you're struggling to tell."

"How bad is Sid?"

"He's a bastard. But like not *that* bad," Ali said. "Johnny's mother is sweet, kind, but smart as hell. She wouldn't stick with someone she knew was as bad as your insinuating. And also their staff doesn't do what you said. They're always polite. Sid's just...opportunistic. He's got that slimy personality you know? But he's not bad. Not like that."

"I think he is," Daniel said quietly. "I think you didn't actually get to see anything."

"We'll just have to go to Johnny's house," Ali said. "And you'll have to show me. But there's no way."

They paid and Daniel drove his way to Johnny's house with Ali next to him.

He parked so the staff wouldn't be able to see her and walked up to the front door.

He worried about running into Johnny. He still hadn't thought of what to say, what to do.

He knocked on the door. The guy from last time opened it, looked down at Daniel, and sighed.

"The little fucker isn't home."

It was worse this time. He cringed.

He heard the door to the Ford open and heard the sound of Ali's shoes on the pavement.

"Oh! Miss Mills. Welcome! The young master isn't home at the moment. But I'd be delighted to leave him a note and tell him you've visited. Have you eaten yet? The chef is still making breakfast, the lady of the house is out eating in the garden. She'd be *delighted* to see you again."

Ali threw her arm around Daniel's shoulder and put her other hand on her hip.

"Oh really? Me, but not Daniel here?"

"I...I was unaware he was...I-"

"It's fine. No need to tell Johnny anything. Just wanted to see if he was home. Thanks for your help," she said.

She was grinning wide, icy cold. She turned, pulling Daniel with her back to the Ford.

"The fuck?" she whispered, eyes wide.

Daniel drove. "So they clearly have protocols in place. For you, probably for his mother. If you didn't know. Maybe *she* doesn't know."

"Who the hell does that?"

"Sid."

Ali frowned.

"You can't give up Daniel."

He blinked looking at her. "Huh?"

"I dated Johnny for 2 years. Knew him longer because of the country club. Because of school. I didn't have a fucking clue. If in your own words, he's letting you be his friend out of guilt, but he's letting you in

this much? You take it. You go in there with a fucking salve. You got to. Someone has to. He never let me in that far and I thought he let me in *far*. I thought I got pretty deep. I thought I graduated with a degree in Johnny Lawrence. But apparently, I graduated preschool." She turned toward him, her arm along the back of the seats. "You like him right?"

"A lot."

"You think you *might* love him?"

He blushed bright red.

She laughed, poking his cheek. "Damn you never blushed like that with me. The Daniel I know, he won't actually leave Johnny alone. He'll go visit Mr. Miyagi, center himself and come up with a plan to whisk Johnny off his feet. Win over that heart you think is so fragile."

"I think I might've damaged it pretty bad," Daniel said. "I mean what if he doesn't like me? What if he is just being my friend out of guilt? What if that kiss really truly disgusted him but he's not going to say anything because he *owes* me?"

He could feel her eyes piercing through him as she brushed hair from her eyes. "Daniel, you *always* jump to conclusions. You always think you understand what the hell someone else is feeling without actually listening to them. You overthink. Your trust is fragmented into little shards so any time you try to trust someone or they try to trust you you both get hurt. You spiral. I say go against what your brain says. Tell it to shut up. So what if Johnny's hanging out with you out of guilt? Or because he owes you? You're enjoying it right?"

"I was."

"Yeah, until you stuck your foot in that big mouth of yours. Be selfish. Do the shit you like. Don't overthink it. When you start overthinking you don't let other people talk and you take off with whatever bad thought you had. You fuck up. You fall into all these misunderstandings. You might owe Johnny an apology for running away. For not listening. Hell I might. Johnny doesn't talk a lot, and hell, when he wanted to talk I should've listened."

She rubbed her face with her hands. "If Sid is *that* bad, who the hell knows what actually happened? But I *can't* think about that. I don't want to know. I can't. I can only do better now. I can't go back and fix it. But you should listen to him. Sometimes he says stupid shit." She

sighed and put her hand on Daniel's shoulder. "But Daniel, I'll help. I'll do what I can. I'll try and help you get the guy if it's possible. If there's an opening you can take I'll help you find it. And if there's not, it still might be worth it just to be his friend. He's clearly doing something right in that avenue, just look at the cobras and how much they love him to pieces."

Daniel felt a lump well up in his throat. He felt tears well up in his eyes. "Thanks Ali. And I'm...sorry again."

She laughed. "I freaked out on you too. So I get it. I didn't want to listen to you either. But you're right. I think we're better off as friends."

She left her hand on his shoulder and he tilted his head, letting his cheek press against it for a moment.

"Promise me something though," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Go home and sleep before you do anything. You look like shit."

He laughed. "Damn Ali."

"And before you spiral, talk to me or someone next time. You explode too easily and you try real hard to scorch the earth. I think you might be right. Johnny can't handle that. Hell I did it to him and he really couldn't handle that. So come find me and we'll talk it through okay? Or like train yourself to calm the fuck down and shut up and just listen. I've got to work on that too. I'm trying to stop, think, and just calm down."

"Got it," Daniel said.

He felt better.

He dropped Ali off near her car and before she left she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Go home and straight to bed. Then go talk to Mr. Miyagi okay?"

"Yeah."

It took a couple of days to get up the courage. He kept overthinking. Jumping to conclusions. Spiraling as Ali said.

What would Mr. Miyagi think? What even would he ask? Would he tell Mr. Miyagi how he felt?

He couldn't lose Mr. Miyagi. But he needed a drought of calm that the man always poured.

He drove over to Mr. Miyagi's house one afternoon and nearly turned around before he parked.

The Avanti was in the parking lot.

He frowned. Heart pounding in his veins.

He couldn't. But he had to apologize. Had to say something. Learn something.

Maybe it was better to face them both at the same time.

He parked the Ford and made his way up the steps. Pushing the door open.

The floor was wet. Odd. He pushed past it.

Mr. Miyagi was at work in the kitchen. It smelled like soup. His lips were in a thin line.

He didn't look happy. Disappointed. Upset. Worried.

Oh god, what if Johnny told him?

"Hey Mr. Miyagi," Daniel said softly, eyes searching for Johnny.

He wasn't there.

"Ah Daniel-san," Mr. Miyagi said. "Make tea."

Daniel blinked and set about filling the kettle with water and putting it on the stove. The atmosphere, it was weird.

"Hey, about Johnny, I didn't mean-I'm sorry Mr. Miyagi. I messed up."

Mr. Miyagi blinked and looked at him.

"Hah, we both?"

Daniel stared at him.

"Both? Wait? Did you-? What happened?"

"Miyagi introduce Johnny-san to friends. Not realize Johnny-san desperate to fix everything. For good. Removed no from vocabulary."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

Mr. Miyagi shook his head adding seasoning to what he was making. "Take Johnny-san out on boat, Daniel-san remember boat. Fun."

Daniel remembered Mr. Miyagi's laughter while rocking the boat and sending Daniel into the lake. He glanced back at the water on the floor. The trail it led.

"Yeah, I remember. You took Johnny?" He grabbed a towel and started drying it up.

"Mmm," Mr. Miyagi said nodding. "Knock Johnny-san in water. Johnny-san not fall in again, no matter how much Miyagi rock. But Miyagi not notice Johnny-san shaking."

He frowned.

"Miyagi not notice many things. Think Johnny-san balancing well. But Johnny-san letting self be crushed instead."

"Crushed?"

"Johnny-san go to school, spend time with friends, help Daniel-san, help Miyagi, babysit Miyagi's friend's children every time asked, keep going to animal sanctuary and help. Johnny-san not stop. Maybe not sleep. Work work work. So body stop for Johnny-san."

"Stop?" Daniel squeaked, panic rushing through his veins.

"Sick. Very sick. Fever," Mr. Miyagi said pointing to the darkened room down the hall. "What Daniel-san do?"

Daniel chewed on his lip with worry, standing. "I panicked, jumped to conclusions, didn't listen to him, and ran away. I haven't spoken to him since."

Mr. Miyagi sighed. "Daniel-san."

"I know," Daniel said, tears pricking at his eyes. "I keep...I keep messing things up. And he's...He was hanging out with Ali and I got upset and I didn't listen."

Mr. Miyagi made a small sound, pouring what looked like porridge

into a bowl, and setting it on a tray. He put it in Daniel's hands.

"Give Johnny-san."

Daniel took it, hesitated a second then turned towards the darkened room. Mr. Miaygi was giving him an opening. An excuse. Just like before, with the shirt.

Johnny's eyes were shut. He was breathing through his mouth, lips parted. His blonde hair was sticking to his forehead.

Daniel set the tray down and sat down next to him. He hesitated a moment before brushing the hair from Johnny's forehead.

He was hot. Definitely had a fever.

Blue eyes opened and found him. Stared. Waited.

Daniel didn't know what to do. Didn't know what to say.

"Daniel?"

"I'm sorry," Daniel whispered. "I shouldn't have...hey, think you can sit up?"

Johnny looked at him, still, staring, waiting. But then he shifted and pushed himself up. Blanket falling from his chest. A bare chest.

Daniel looked away, grabbing the tray with the porridge.

"Mr. Miyagi made you food. You should eat."

Johnny took the offered tray and ate. He was quiet, but his blue eyes bored into Daniel. Patient.

"I'm sorry," Daniel said again. "I...saw you and Ali and panicked. I talked to Ali. It was weird. But I feel more focused. Kind of. I mean I still panicked for a couple of days. I thought, I mean...when I moved here I *thought* I made friends. And then when I lost that fight on the beach they ditched me. Made fun of me. And everyone else avoided me. I wasn't used to that. In Newark...I didn't have these problems. It's not easy. I'm like a fish out of water here. So I second guess everything. Everyone's motives. Everyone's actions. I don't trust them I guess. So I convince myself of things that aren't always true. Or I don't actually listen to the responses." Daniel took a deep breath, he was fidgeting. He had to just ask. But that desire to bolt was rising again like a wave. "Do you...do you hate me for kissing you? Did I ruin

everything?"

Johnny blinked at him and shook his head. "No."

"Think we can still be friends?"

Johnny nodded.

Daniel's shoulders relaxed a little. "I'll make it up to you. I promise," he said reaching out.

Johnny's hair had fallen again. It was getting long, he tucked it behind Johnny's ear, cupping his face ever so gently.

Johnny shut his eyes and pressed his face ever so slightly against Daniel's hand. Daniel's heart pounded.

Johnny liked that. Must have. Right? Why else would he? Okay. He'd have to remember that.

He wanted to kiss him. But he couldn't. He'd fucked up too much. He'd thrown a damn anchor into the foundation he'd been working on.

Johnny was shivering.

Daniel grabbed the blanket, pulling it around Johnny's shoulders.

He could do this. Take care of Johnny while he was sick. While he tried to figure it out.

"I'm sorry for not checking in on you earlier," Daniel said.

"'s okay," Johnny rasped. His throat sounded nearly as bad as after Kreese had...

It hurt Daniel's heart, twisted it in a vice.

"No. It's not," Daniel said. "Eat your porridge or I honestly don't know what it is, but eat it okay?"

Johnny nodded and ate.

Daniel didn't want to leave. But he could feel the tears in his eyes. He was mad at himself. He knew better. He always was better. He just couldn't help himself, couldn't stop himself.

He knew Johnny was fragile. Recovering. Letting him in, like Ali had

said.

What if he closed up again? Put space between them because Daniel had shoved him away? Because he'd broken that fragile trust that was growing?

He'd never forgive himself.

Mr. Miyagi was mixing something into a mug. He had several jars open. He glanced up at Daniel.

Daniel walked over.

"He sounds awful," Daniel breathed.

"Hai," Mr. Miyagi said nodding.

"What is this?" Daniel asked, trying to stave off tears, pointing to the porridge.

"Okayu. Rice and soup. Congee. Dinner Miyagi make Nabe."

Daniel nodded, he took a shaky breath and folded his arms over his chest. "I'll stay and help."

"Hai."

"Mr. Miyagi?" Daniel asked after a while.

"Hmm?"

"You think he'll forgive me?"

Mr. Miyagi blinked, then looked back at Daniel.

Tears were running down Daniel's cheeks.

"Daniel-san heart hurt?"

Daniel nodded.

"Sometimes...Daniel-san overthink. Yes?"

Daniel nodded again.

"Daniel-san run headfirst in wrong way. Like first-time play sport. Keep scoring for wrong team. Daniel-san panic. Need to breathe. Re-center. Listen to thoughts. When they go wrong way. Stop. Ask why?

Why Daniel-san panicking? Why mind going wrong way again? Like alarm bell, yes? So Daniel-san looking for fire, no fire. Go through, calm, talk to self. Hmm? Johnny-san talk to Ali-san yes? Daniel-san panic. Did Johnny-san or Ali-san give Johnny-san reason to panic?"

"No. Probably not."

"No fire. But Daniel-san worried. Re-train mind. What is actual fire. What is fake fire. Brain try to protect Daniel-san. But scaring Daniel-san. Making panic. So Daniel-san breathe. Look for source. Then talk, gently. Ask. Johnny-san answer yes?"

"I didn't let him," Daniel said rubbing tears from his cheeks.

Mr. Miyagi nodded. "Must also listen. Johnny-san very quiet. Like Miyagi?"

Daniel laughed softly. "Yeah."

"Johnny-san also say wrong thing sometimes. And sometimes say nothing. Daniel-san easy. Daniel-san talk lots. Miyagi can pick out what Daniel-san means. Johnny-san though hides much. So Miyagi has to look for it. Like hawk. Miyagi getting old, hawk eyes aren't same anymore. So need Daniel-san's help. Help Miyagi realize when there are cracks. Where they are. We use Miyagi's medicine. Patch him up. But Daniel-san have to listen. Look for it. Just like when Daniel-san upset have to stop and breathe. Do exercise. Like kata. Find balance."

Daniel nodded. He finished brushing away tears and took a deep breath.

"Tea ready. Want to take to Johnny-san? Or Miyagi take?"

"I'll do it. I think. Yeah. I can do it," Daniel said holding out his hands and taking the tea.

He walked back to the dim room and sat down next to Johnny again.

Johnny had set the tray aside and had nodded off while sitting, head bowed. How had he not noticed how tired Johnny looked all this time? Not until now? Not until he crashed?

Daniel gently lifted Johnny's chin.

"Johnny?" he whispered.

Blue eyes opened.

"Mr. Miyagi made you tea. It'll help. Can you drink it?"

Johnny nodded and Daniel carefully put it in his hands. "I'll be back. I'm going to clean this up," Daniel said softly taking the tray and porridge and took it to the kitchen to clean.

"Good," Mr. Miyagi said nodding to the empty bowl. "Ask if still hungry."

Daniel nodded and went to stand in the doorway.

"Think you could eat more?"

Johnny shook his head.

"No, Mr. Miyagi."

"Hai."

Daniel walked back into the room. Taking more in this time. Johnny's bag was on the floor, the bonsai was sitting on the side of the table.

He'd glanced back once before driving away. To see Johnny running after him, only for a moment. He regretted not stopping, not going back. But he couldn't. He couldn't bring himself to stop. To turn around. Even though he could tell from Johnny's face, the mask completely gone that it'd been the wrong choice.

Johnny was still watching him. So quiet.

Tears pricked at his eyes.

What if Johnny never talked to Daniel again. Just sat there quietly and stared?

"I'm sorry. I should've stopped. I should've listened. I fucked up. You're being my friend and I...I got jealous and I...I didn't listen to what you said or would've said. And you're so used to people not listening, like I...I did what Ali did and I never wanted...Johnny, I'm sorry."

He bowed his head, he didn't want to cry. *He'd* hurt Johnny. Why was *he* crying?

He heard Johnny moving, shifting in his bed slowly.

He looked up.

Johnny was inching closer. Moving so slow. His hand was reaching for Daniel. Gently going behind him. Daniel thought he was going to get a hug. Which made him cry more. Johnny kept studying him. Looking for something that Daniel wasn't sure what it was. But then his forehead pressed against Daniel's and Johnny shut his eyes. His hand was resting gently on Daniel's shoulder, patting gently. That tap tap. *It's okay.*

"Talk," Johnny said softly.

"I...did I make you sick?"

"No."

"Did I ruin everything?"

"No."

"You don't hate me?"

"No."

Johnny's forehead was hot. He appreciated the gesture but he worried. This was probably too much for Johnny. He gently put his hand on Johnny's shoulder, taking the cup of tea from his other hand.

"You should get some rest," Daniel whispered.

Johnny's eyes flicked open again, searching through Daniel's face for something but nodding and pulling away. Daniel reached out gently to his back, his skin was so warm, too warm. Soft. He helped Johnny to lay down.

Johnny's eyes shut. His breathing slowed. After a while his eyes flicked open again, searching around the room, finding Daniel, staring, then shut again.

It happened a few more times.

"Hey, I'm not going anywhere okay?" Daniel whispered.

He tucked Johnny in, pulling the blanket closer around his bare shoulders, and after a moment's hesitation took Johnny's hand in his.

Johnny stopped jerking awake.

So Daniel stayed.

He watched Johnny sleep, gently running his thumb over the back of Johnny's hand.

Hope Growing like Weeds

The phone woke Johnny up. He blinked up at the ceiling. It wasn't his ceiling.

"...hai, Johnny-san here."

That was Mr. Miyagi. He was in Mr. Miyagi's house.

He pushed himself up. He felt gross. His bonsai was on the bedside table, which was a relief.

"Hai."

There was a weight on his leg. Daniel. Daniel was sitting in a chair, but curled over onto the bed, using Johnny's thigh as a pillow. Hugging it tight.

"Which lake?"

Johnny tried moving, shifting, but Daniel just held on tighter. He stared.

He wasn't sure if this was real Daniel or dream Daniel. Real Daniel was upset with him because he misunderstood. Because he thought Johnny had gone after Ali again. Or Ali had come after Johnny. But because of Ali.

Because he was still so broken-hearted. He got that. He understood that.

Dream Daniel kept crying and promising him things.

"Good lake for fishing."

Johnny reached out tentatively, placing his hand on the back of Daniel's head, running his fingers through Daniel's soft messy hair. Dream Daniel had taken care of him while he was sick. Maybe he was still dreaming.

"If Johnny-san better, I bring Johnny-san and Daniel-san."

If this was the real Daniel then...

Nothing about that position looked comfortable. His back was going to

be stiff, his knee probably would hurt.

He really shouldn't have been sleeping like that.

"Ah, Johnny-san awake, here."

Johnny looked up. The phone was being held out to him by Mr. Miyagi, the cord stretching. Johnny took it carefully. He held it to his ear.

"Hello?" His voice sounded awful, cracking.

He remembered being out with Mr. Miyagi, had been coughing for a couple of days, but thought it was leftover from being hungover and crying so much.

Mr. Miyagi had given him medicine as soon as he'd driven Johnny back to his house.

Johnny didn't even know what day it was.

"Johnny! Oh, thank god! You *can't* do that. You can't just drop off the grid. You can't disappear. I was worried sick. Promise me you'll never do that again."

It was Bobby. He sounded panicked.

"Get sick?" Johnny asked, a smirk playing on his lips.

"Dude, seriously? I haven't heard from you since Saturday. Most of spring break is over. The hell man? You were supposed to be here. Do you know how many people I had to call to find you? I called your place, called every bar we've ever been to, I even called Ali man and that was the most awkward conversation I think I've ever had in my life, and I even dragged the LaRusso number out of Jimmy, and hmm that was also awkward but she gave me Mr. Miyagi's number. Man, you can't do this to me. Not when..."

Not after Friday, when you wouldn't stop crying.

"Yeah," Johnny said. "Sorry."

A loud heavy sigh came through the phone. Johnny could hear the guys in the background. And Bobby turning his head away from the receiver. "Yeah, he's at Mr. Miyagi's. Apparently, he's been sick. Sounds like shit."

"You okay man?" Bobby asked, voice-directed to him again.

"Yeah."

"You're coming, right? I mean Mr. Miyagi said he was going to drive you over. He sounded...I mean I don't know him that well...but pretty excited about the lake."

Johnny chuckled, it hurt a little. "Private lake means fishing."

"Is that what he's into? Damn. Okay. I'll tell the guys to ready a boat for him. He can go fishing to his heart's content. Jimmy's...dude will you stop hitting me, fine you talk to him."

"Johnny, I'm getting the grill ready man. Get your ass here. Even if you're fucking sick. I ordered a shit ton of chorizo and boerewors. Hell, bring Daniel. Bobby's going to have to stay like on the other end of the room from him because he's still being pissy. But man, I bought too much food and if you can bring some back up I'd appreciate it. Hey, you think Mr. Miyagi would eat some? He's from where, Japan? He vegetarian?"

"Okinawa. No."

"I got that soda in. Brought it. Because you know, I prepped *before* Friday. Listen. Give Bobby some time. We've chewed him out. You know for being the *only* one there and not calling me until so much later, or like not calling everyone else. I know you get overwhelmed. But man, you really okay?"

"Yeah," Johnny said gently reaching out to Daniel again.

Daniel was still sleeping.

Johnny leaned against the wall. "Got my hopes up."

"Damn. Okay. We'll dial it back a little. It's going to be a bitch to get Dutch to dial it back. Dutch! Where the hell did you get those? Put those away. Sorry man. He's like a fucking child. Here's Bobby back."

"Hey."

"Dutch get your ass back here! If you light one of those on fire I'm going to shove it in your mouth. Fireworks are fucking illegal in California. You set those off and we get a fucking wildfire I sure as hell am not going down with you on that."

"Chaos. Absolute chaos," Bobby said with a sigh. "All week so far."

"What day is it?"

"Friday. Dude, how long have you been out? Like a fucking week?"

Johnny thought about it. He'd babysat the kids for a couple of days. Their parents had some emergency and had to be out of town. One had been sick and couldn't sleep. He'd been there until four in the morning when they finally got back days later. Then he'd gone to the animal sanctuary and worked until he met with Mr. Miyagi. "Three days."

"Fuck."

"Yeah."

"Could you get your ass here?" Bobby asked.

He sounded tired. But there was that strain of worry, concern. A thread underlying everything else.

"Yeah."

"Okay, well hurry up."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Johnny set the phone down, the receiver too far away, and gently poked Daniel's cheek. He was starting to think this wasn't a dream. That the real Daniel was clinging to his leg like a pillow.

Daniel shifted in his sleep, hand going up Johnny's thigh, a little too close. A little too far. Johnny swallowed an unmanly sound, his skin erupting in goosebumps as he shivered.

Sleeping Daniel was almost as bad as dream Daniel. But dream Daniel knew what he was doing and did it on purpose. Sleeping Daniel didn't have a clue what he was doing to Johnny.

They'd already had an awful misunderstanding along this vein. Johnny wasn't sure how Daniel would react to waking up knowing how close his hand was to Johnny's dick. He slid a finger under Daniel's palm.

He could try and remove it, the way you were supposed to pick up a snail, to slide your hand underneath rather than to pull on the shell.

Give him something else to hold onto. Something safer.

His fingers brushed against Daniel's palm. This was more stressful than taking a math test. To try and not wake Daniel up, to not let him grab anything else in that general direction, to pry him off.

He moved slow, sliding his hand under Daniel's and then it popped off his inner thigh and held his hand.

He sighed, relaxing his shoulders a little.

"Hey Daniel," Johnny said softly.

"Mmm."

"I wanna shower."

A brown eye opened and looked at him. Then sat back up suddenly, letting go of his hand.

"Huh? Sorry."

Johnny blinked. "I'm going to shower."

"Uh-huh. Okay. Uhh. I leave clothes at Mr. Miyagi's. You know, he dumps you into a lake or ocean enough times you gotta leave a change of clothes." Daniel looked nervous, was avoiding Johnny's eyes, wasn't looking at Johnny.

His hair was so messy. Sticking up more than Johnny had ever seen. Even compared to the lodge. That had been tame. This was wild.

"I don't think your clothes will fit me," Johnny said. "I got stuff in the trunk of the Avanti."

"Oh, I'll get it," Daniel said. "Where are your keys?"

"I can-"

"Let me," Daniel said quickly.

"Keys are in my bag. There's a gym bag in the trunk. Just bring the whole thing."

"Got it," Daniel said and Johnny got up, slowly, carefully.

"Mr. Miyagi, mind if I use your shower?"

"Hai," Mr. Miyagi said waving for Johnny to go ahead. "Breakfast ready soon."

Johnny walked into Mr. Miyagi's bathroom. He was a little too tall for the showerhead and had to duck down to wash his hair. But it felt better to have the warm water run along his skin.

It was Friday. He'd missed most of spring break. He was supposed to have met the guys a couple of days ago. No wonder they panicked. Johnny had never missed anything with them before.

After his fishing trip with Mr. Miyagi that ended up not being fishing. Ended up with Johnny standing on the prow of the boat trying to balance while Mr. Miyagi tried to throw him in the lake. Another balancing test.

Johnny didn't know what it meant. What Mr. Miyagi was up to. But if Mr. Miyagi wanted Johnny to carry him through the mountains like Yoda made Luke, he'd do it.

He'd seen the guys Saturday morning. He'd woken up to Dutch and Tommy coming in with donuts and coffee. Jumping on the bed.

Too loud. Too cheerful.

Foisting donuts and coffee into his hands almost as soon as he'd opened his eyes.

Bobby had thrown a pillow at their head, grumpy with his hangover. Eventually, though they got him up too and eating.

No questions asked, just there. Talking about the trip to the lake house. All the things they wanted to do.

No mention of Daniel. It was a first. In months. Where Daniel didn't come up. It was like they were avoiding the topic.

One of many they avoided around him.

He sighed. He hadn't meant to get his hopes up. But he hadn't noticed that he had. He thought Daniel might've...could've... one day liked him back. But of course, he was still all twisted up about Ali. It had taken Johnny *months* to get over her and sometimes it still stung.

Nearly a whole semester.

It'd only been a few months. Who knew how much her kissing the UCLA guy had affected Daniel. His pride. He'd only had one friend at school. Everything had been piled onto one relationship. Just Ali.

Johnny at least had the cobras. Could rely on them when he was hurt, even if he didn't ask them for help they just always showed up. Hell, they hunted him down when they couldn't find him.

He always wondered how they found him. At the bar. It was Jimmy's cousin's bar, he guessed Jimmy's cousin called Bobby. Like *hey blondie is here, come get him.*

He hadn't realized they did that. That they had that sort of system set up. That if Johnny didn't show up they'd go looking for him. That they'd show up. But they kept doing that. Even when he had nothing to offer them in return.

Idiot. When you're not around we miss you.

He sighed. He didn't know what they saw in him. But it was comforting.

He heard the door open.

"I'm setting your bag here," Daniel's voice said.

"Thanks," Johnny said.

He heard the door click again.

Johnny peered out. His bag was sitting in the corner. He breathed in the warm steam.

Whenever he felt like he was going to fall over, whenever he felt like he was going to just give up, they always showed up and propped him up. Said things that felt like the first moment of spring after a fire. Like after the wildfires and things started to grow again.

It was like all the stuff Mr. Miyagi told him. Like when Daniel held his hand.

It'd be okay. He'd be okay.

Today was easy. He'd go see the guys. Eat whatever Jimmy put on his plate. Tell them to be nice to Daniel. He knew Bobby would need

time. It'd been in his voice. In Jimmy's tone.

He stepped out of the shower and dried off, opening his bag and pulling out a change of clothes. He felt better. His throat was still a little sore. His voice sounded awful. But he didn't feel like he had to cling to the walls to move. Which was progress.

He walked out with his bag over his shoulder.

"So, uh, thanks," Johnny said to Mr. Miyagi who was putting on his fishing vest.

"Miyagi cook. Daniel-san take care of Johnny-san," Mr. Miyagi said softly. "Daniel-san try to make up for mistake."

Johnny blinked. So it *wasn't* a dream. Daniel had brought him food, held his hand, and had cried. Had helped him up and walked him to the other side of the room so he could lean against the wall on his way to the bathroom, tucked him back into bed, played with his hair, put cold compresses on his forehead. Took care of him. Hadn't left his side for days.

"Breakfast ready," Mr. Miyagi said.

Johnny followed him back to the kitchen. He set out rice and soup, egg that looked like it was layered almost like a cake, and a bit of fish and vegetables.

Daniel was sitting down, his hair was still sticking up but he'd changed and he was staring at the food.

"Breakfast?" Daniel asked.

"Hai."

"Huh."

"Thank you, Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said picking up his chopsticks.

He felt so much more confident with them now. Picking up the food was so much easier. He ate quietly.

Daniel tried everything, commented on everything. It was nice to hear him talk again. That endless stream of conversation. The abysmal table manners.

"What's this?"

"Egg. tamagoyaki...like omelet, rolled and fried."

Daniel nodded.

Johnny picked up his and tried it. Like Jimmy's house or Tommy's, like Mrs. LaRusso's apartment, Mr. Miyagi's house was somewhere where he felt like he could eat anything and it'd be amazing. Anything Mr. Miyagi gave him to eat, Johnny would. And it'd be delicious.

Daniel was commenting on the eggs. Trying to figure out how it was made. He was trying to figure out what everything was in the soup. All the different flavors, components working together.

When they finished they helped Mr. Miyagi clean up.

"We go, hmm?" Mr. Miyagi asked.

"Uh, yeah," Johnny said, grabbing his bags and carefully getting his bonsai.

Mr. Miyagi was singing to himself. Walking off through the parking lot past his truck.

Johnny relaxed. He was relieved Mr. Miyagi wasn't going for the truck again. He didn't think he or Daniel could handle that again. Not now.

Mr. Miyagi patted the side of the blue and white Nash Metropolitan. He popped the trunk and set his fishing gear inside. Then looked back at Johnny.

Johnny hurried and set his bags in.

Mr. Miyagi handed him the keys.

Johnny stared at them in wonder.

"Feel okay?" Mr. Miyagi asked.

"Yes."

"Daniel-san, time to go," Mr. Miyagi called.

"Coming!" Daniel said. He'd brushed his hair and was hopping back into his shoes. "Oh no way! We're taking the Nash?"

"Hai," Mr. Miyagi said opening the door to the backseat and he sunk into the back.

Johnny stared at the keys.

This was one of Mr. Miyagi's nice cars. Like the Ford he'd given Daniel. A classic he'd painstakingly restored. And Johnny got to drive it. No one let him drive something this old, this nice. No one ever trusted him with something like that.

He opened the driver's seat door while Daniel looked at the car with wonder, brown eyes wide before joining him up front, in the passenger seat. He was bubbling again. About to overflow.

Johnny understood that. Looking at wonder at the inside of the car.

The bubble popped Daniel started talking. How beautiful the car was. How it was his first time inside any of them other than the truck or Ford. They'd been under the hood. Mr. Miyagi had shown them out to repair it. But it was different sitting inside of it.

Johnny turned the key and it came to life.

"Seatbelt Daniel," Johnny said.

"Ah, right," Daniel said, putting the seat belt on. He was all hands again. Talking and distracted.

Johnny was going to drive them to the lake house. It'd take a while, they had to get out of the city. But it wasn't like the lodge. This little car could handle it. His Avanti could handle it.

It was nice to drive. Nice to get out of the house. Even if he loved Mr. Miyagi's house. Getting out after being sick was a relief.

He'd have to borrow Jimmy's phone and call and see how the kid was doing.

Daniel was talking about cars, asking Mr. Miyagi about the one they were in. When Mr. Miyagi had gotten it. How long it'd taken to restore it. He wondered if Daniel wanted the same thing. To find a nice car like this, take it back to Mr. Miyagi and work on it together. To fix it.

It was such a nice day. The sun was up in the sky. Everything would be okay.

The roads to the lake house were easy. He made his way up to the gate, rolled the window down, and leaned over pushing the buttons on the keypad. The gates slid open and he continued up towards the

house. The lake was big, easy to see from the drive.

"Wow," Daniel whispered.

Johnny glanced over. He liked that. Surprising Daniel with the beauty that could be found in California. Albeit this one wasn't accessible to everyone.

He parked the Nash Metropolitan. He saw Jimmy down by the lake at the grill. Bobby was in the water, swimming, it looked like a race between him and Dutch. Tommy was opening the door to the house, carrying a big cooler.

They got out.

"Hey, you made it finally. You feeling okay?" Tommy asked.

"Yeah."

"Cool car."

Mr. Miyagi gathered his fishing supplies from the trunk and Johnny started to head down. He noticed that Daniel hesitated. He stopped. Johnny looked back. Cleared his throat.

"Your still welcome...to hang out with us," Johnny said.

He thought about holding out his hand. Would that be too much? He didn't have to take it. Daniel could walk past him down the hill to the lake if he wanted.

He held out his hand.

Daniel still hesitated. But he took the proffered hand. Johnny hadn't expected that. Hadn't expected Daniel to take his hand again.

Hope kept springing up. He kept trying to dig it up, store it elsewhere. But it was becoming a weed. It kept growing back, every time he dug it up. No matter how much he cautioned himself. No matter how much he tried to hold onto reality.

Mr. Miyagi was already standing on the dock with his fishing gear looking out at the lake. Tommy was setting up the boat, talking to him, holding it steady while Mr. Miyagi climbed in. He looked happy. Absolutely delighted to get to fish in a lake he'd never been in before.

"Another guy easy to please," Jimmy said as they reached the bottom

of the hill. He grinned at Johnny. "So how'd you get sick?"

"Kid I was watching was sick. I think I caught it," Johnny said.

Daniel was hiding behind him a little. Quiet. He hadn't let go of his hand yet.

Jimmy shook his head with a sigh. "You're babysitting?"

"Yeah."

"Since when?"

"A little over a month, almost two."

"Damn. What else are you hiding?"

Johnny thought about it. It wasn't that he was hiding, he just hadn't brought it up.

"Been working at an animal sanctuary."

"Seriously? What kind of animals do they have?"

"Everything."

"Like horses and cats and what, frogs?"

"Yeah."

Jimmy closed the grill.

"Why didn't you tell us you were sick?" Jimmy asked.

"He could barely sit up," Daniel said softly letting go of Johnny's hand.

It was shocking how fast he missed holding Daniel's hand.

"Wait, so you...took care of him?"

Daniel was looking at the ground, digging his foot in the dirt and grass. "Yeah. I figured it'd be the least I could do."

Jimmy frowned. Johnny caught the glint in his eye. He knew Bobby was pissed. But he figured the rest of them would sway a little easier.

"Yeah." It was steely. Cold.

He had to relieve the tension. He didn't know what to say. "I've been left behind at worse places, I at least still had the Avanti," he said with a small laugh.

It was a joke. It wasn't like Daniel and him were heading anywhere together or had even left school grounds. He hadn't been left behind. Not really. Daniel had just run away. And saying he was used to Daniel running away from him, while true, also hurt and wasn't something to say.

Both of them shot him a look. Clearly not the right thing to say.

Daniel looked horrified.

Jimmy looked pissed, questions in his eyes. A *who? when? where?*

"I just mean," Johnny struggled. Oh god, why'd he even open his mouth? "I'm fine." He cleared his throat. He'd made it worse. It wasn't a big deal. It wasn't. "Listen. I'm okay. Yeah?"

"Who the hell-"

"When did someone-"

He'd opened a can of worms.

Tommy was coming back up from the lake.

He could run over. He could avoid this. Hands clamped down on his wrists. Jimmy and Daniel were leaning forward.

"It just happens sometimes. A lot more when I was little okay?"

"That's worse. Like you realize that's worse right?" Jimmy said.

"Was it Sid?" Daniel asked softly.

"Sid's left me at places before. But he always sends someone else to pick me up. A couple of hours later. When Mom notices...but no...it happened a lot with kids from school."

He glanced away from them. Jimmy's hand tightened on his wrist.

"It's nothing, it's seriously was nothing. Just stupid kids being stupid. You know?"

"You mean you'd go places with other kids and then they'd ditch you?"

Jimmy said, voice low, and hard.

It wasn't exactly like that. Close. Usually, he got beat up too. He fell for it too easily. The let's go do something fun. Only for it to be a nightmare that wasn't fun for Johnny. But it meant that Johnny could be dropped anywhere in LA and find his way home. He always knew where he was because he'd been left behind in almost every corner.

Daniel's eyes were too big. Too horrified. *This was nothing.* Daniel was too pale.

"Damnit," Daniel whispered.

"Yeah, yeah," Jimmy said, in a voice, a voice Johnny recognized. An argument. A fight. Revving himself up.

Tommy was so close.

He could bolt.

He could- arms wrapped around him.

He blinked.

Daniel's arms were wrapped around him. He held his hands up.

Jimmy had let go of his wrist, he was staring.

Daniel was hugging him tightly.

"You gotta take better care of him," Jimmy said after a while, smacking Daniel's back, fight gone.

Johnny shot him a look but Jimmy just grinned and walked off to Tommy.

"Don't you dare go anywhere," Daniel said into his chest. "You just drop the most heartbreaking shit, so suffer this hug."

Johnny didn't know what to do with his hands. Daniel really was stronger than he looked. It was like a grip. If he moved just so he could send Johnny to the ground.

He lowered his hand and awkwardly patted Daniel's shoulder.

Daniel laughed into his chest.

Should he hug him back? He lowered his arms, around Daniel's shoulders.

"I won't ever do it again. I promise. I won't abandon you. I won't leave you behind. I won't leave you alone."

Johnny lowered his head, resting it atop Daniel's. He waited to feel any sort of pull. For Daniel to let go, to pull away from him, to stiffen. But he didn't. He could feel Daniel's steady breathing, his heartbeat. He was talking still. Muttering about stupid kids. How was he as stupid as a kid? He was 18. He was supposed to be an adult.

18. Huh. Daniel was older than him. Who'd have thought?

Daniel's hands were rubbing his back. Soothing motions. He did seem to have a better handle on life. More balanced. As nice as it was he couldn't let Daniel keep beating himself over something so...common in Johnny's life.

"When you went to Golf 'n Stuff, did you play mini-golf?" Johnny asked.

"Huh?" Daniel asked prying himself away, just slightly to look up.

"Jimmy's got croquet here. It's set up in the grass. If you want to play."

"Croquet..."

"It's the Alice in Wonderland game. The one with the flamingos," Johnny explained.

"I'm sorry, but what the hell is that? Is this some rich person thing? You actually play with flamingos?" Daniel asked. He laughed, not a big laugh, but a small one and it was enough. Nice to hear it again.

"No. Mallets. It's kinda like mini-golf but you have to get it through the wickets, not holes."

"I think you're making this up."

"I'm not. It's an actual game. Seriously. It's over there," Johnny said motioning the stakes that looked like giant staples sticking up out of the ground.

Daniel looked. "Definitely a rich person game."

Johnny sighed. "I guess? I didn't learn to play till we moved in with

Sid and I visited some other kid's house. The guys like to play it here. Mostly because they suck at it while drunk. Because if you keep getting it through the proper wickets you get to keep taking your shots, but if you don't, then you got to wait. And when they're drunk, they miss a lot."

"I'll give it a try," Daniel said.

It took a while of explaining how to use the mallet, the format of the direction you had to hit the ball through the wickets. But eventually, that competitive spirit flared up in Daniel and he started talking. A mile a minute. Asking who came up with games like this? Johnny didn't have the answer. It looked so easy, was this a kid's game? Kind of. He complained about rich people's games being boring. But was absolutely delighted when he won the second round.

Insufferable. Cute.

He noticed though that Daniel kept looking out at the lake. The glittering water. Mr. Miyagi was out in the center, fishing peacefully. Dutch and Bobby were still swimming around. He leaned against his mallet.

"You wanna take a closer look at the lake? You can swim in it. If you want."

He remembered Daniel's constant complaint. Being so close to the ocean and everyone having all these pools and never getting to swim.

"Yes!" Daniel said turning to him, excited.

Johnny gathered up the mallets and the wooden balls and put them away then walked down to the dock.

"I'm going to just stick my feet in," Johnny said taking a seat on the dock.

"You're not going to swim?"

"I'm still not 100%. Probably would be a bad idea."

Daniel frowned but nodded. He took off his shoes and socks, took off his shirt, and then dove into the water.

Bobby swam over to Johnny who was setting his own shoes and socks aside and sticking his feet in the water. It was cool.

"There's sunblock in my jacket," Bobby said pointing. "Put some on before you burn."

"Thanks, *Mom*," Johnny said.

"Hey, don't take that tone with me, young man. You burn so easy. And then you're just quietly miserable. And grumpy. I don't wanna deal with that. So use the sunscreen," Bobby said before swimming away.

Johnny sighed, grabbing Bobby's jacket and fishing out the sunscreen, rubbing it on his exposed skin.

Dutch popped up.

"So....how's uh...this going?" Dutch asked motioning towards Daniel and then back at Johnny, treading water.

"I want you to get rid of your prom deadline," Johnny said, rubbing the lotion into his neck and face.

"Seriously?"

"It took me like six months to get over Ali. *Almost* six months. It's only been. What 2 months for Daniel? He's still struggling with it. And we've got what two months before prom?"

"Less than that," Dutch said.

"So just, can you dial it back?"

Dutch frowned. "I heard what happened. You think it was because Ali's been hanging around again?"

"Yeah."

"Are you...giving up?"

Johnny glanced at him. Dutch swam over and leaned against the edge of the dock and looked up at him seriously.

"Every time I think I should give up hope pops up. It's like weeds. It's overwhelming. I...really do like him. But I know I need time to figure myself out and what I want. He needs to get over Ali. And then we'll see."

"Hope blooming like weeds," Dutch said with a frown looking at the dock. "Why are you making hope seem like a bad thing?"

Johnny blinked. "I..."

Dutch pulled himself up out of the water and sat next to him on the dock, looking out at the water at Daniel swimming. He sighed.

"You know Bobby is pissed right?"

"Figured."

"It's because Bobby doesn't fuck up that much. He doesn't know what it's like to panic and fuck up. Not that badly. I mean I get it. Daniel I mean. Kind of. I do stupid shit all the time. Sometimes I have to walk away and think about it."

"I...thought he'd never talk to me again," Johnny said quietly.

"Why? What could you have possibly done to-"

Johnny shrugged. "It's happened for fewer reasons, even more, confusing reasons."

Dutch stared at him. "And yet you still have hope?"

"He came back okay? No ones ever done that and come back. And he's cried more than I have over it."

Dutch burst out laughing at his side.

"What did he also nurse you back to health?"

Johnny nodded.

"What is it with you and your life turning into a fucking soap opera? Next, you're going to tell me Daniel has a twin, and one of them is gonna end up in a coma and you're going to get kissed and slapped not in that exact order."

"How many soap operas do you watch?" Johnny asked amused.

"Hey man, you try and find something to watch when you got mono and are stuck at home."

"Wouldn't know, never caught mono."

"Hey did you tell him?" Bobby asked as he swam over.

"No, was waiting for you," Dutch said. "I mean do you *really* think he

doesn't know?"

"We're covering our bases. Besides you already did the leg work," Bobby said pulling himself up to sit on the other side of Johnny on the dock.

"But seriously?" Dutch asked again.

"Here, let me," Bobby said holding out a hand to Dutch to quiet down and then turned to Johnny. "Hey, you remember when I beat up Dutch, what does the word he used mean?"

Johnny frowned. "It's a cigarette right?"

Bobby leaned over giving Dutch a look.

Dutch looked at Johnny. "You sweet sunshine child. Bobby, you're right. He's clueless."

"What the hell is happening?" Johnny asked uneasily.

Dutch cleared his throat and sat up straight. "I know you know how to have sex with a girl. You were with Ali two years and well I did have a room next to yours at least on one occasion."

Johnny turned to look at Dutch, burning red. "The hell?"

"Shush," Dutch said. "We realized, someone, needs to have *the talk* with you."

"What the hell is happening?" Johnny said turning to Bobby.

"Well, the school covers the birds and the bees...and not particularly well I might add," Bobby said. "But not the bees and bees or birds and birds, you know?"

Horror dawned on Johnny. "What the hell? Like you two are even qualified to...why? What did you *do*?"

"Well, you know that punk bar we go to sometimes?" Dutch asked.

"Yeah?" Johnny asked uneasily.

"Well, I went and talked to the owner, the gay one. Told him I had a friend who liked this other guy and I didn't think he knew how to do it so I wanted to know if he had any advice. Like what the talk is for dudes who like dudes."

Johnny was contemplating what would happen if he just slid into the water and didn't come up again. Whose friends did this? What sort of nightmare was it where your friends cornered you to make sure you knew how to...fuck?

"And I had a call with my uncles," Bobby said. "We wanted to compare notes, make sure nothing was missed."

"Essentially," Dutch said holding up his hand. "You need lots of lube, a condom, to prepare, and to go slow."

"My uncles stressed the same thing. Also that most porn is inaccurate and if the condom breaks to get checked out depending on each party's history. I got a list of clinics where the staff are nice."

"Some of the stuff is the same. But it's also anal."

What was wrong with his friends?

"My uncles are also coming next month to like take me out for brunch and ask me who I'm dating....they apparently didn't believe the "my friend likes a guy" thing," Bobby said.

"Oh, the guy at the punk bar didn't believe me either. Wished me luck. Told me to bring my boyfriend to the club sometime and then when I corrected him he said to bring my friend and *his* boyfriend," Dutch said. "But he did air quotes."

"So you got that?" Bobby asked.

He was going to kill them.

"Yeah, sure," Johnny said. "Hey, you want to know about this meditation I'm learning?"

"Uh sure," Bobby said uneasily.

"So you take a deep breath, a very very deep breath and you hold it," Johnny said, breathing in deeply and holding his breath.

They both did at his side and he leaned back shoving them both off the dock and into the water. He pulled his legs up and under him. He grabbed his shoes and hurried off the dock. He heard them come up spluttering and yelling at him. Dutch's voice followed.

"Fine! Then I'll ask Daniel!"

Johnny froze, turning, but Dutch was already swimming out towards Daniel.

He wouldn't make it in time. He was too far.

"Ask Daniel what?" Tommy asked coming up next to him.

"I..." Johnny watched Daniel stop his swimming. Dutch was grinning, talking. And then Daniel responded earnestly. Kept talking. It didn't stop. It was one of Daniel's rants. One that was just a waterfall of information dumped on someone's head.

They had to be talking about something else. Dutch had just said that to get under his skin.

Bobby was walking toward him, drying himself off with a towel and grabbing his jacket and sunscreen.

"I really don't know," Johnny whispered.

Bobby turned. "Huh, you know I don't think I've ever seen Daniel talk so much to Dutch. Even from a distance."

"It's normal," Johnny said. "He talks a lot."

Bobby studied his face. "You weirdo. You *like* that he's chatty."

"It's calming."

"Oh, looks like Dutch lost his battle of wits. Here he comes."

Sure enough, Dutch was pulling himself up onto the pier. His head was bowed and he was walking fast. He was bright red.

"You okay?" Tommy asked.

"Shut up," Dutch said, breaking into a jog towards the house.

Bobby burst out laughing. "I never thought I'd see the day where someone embarrassed Dutch. Oh, I gotta find out what happened," he said turning and following after.

"You guys hungry?" Jimmy called.

"Yeah!" Tommy called back. He gently nudged his elbow at Johnny. "Why don't you call Daniel and Mr. Miyagi back in? Let them know lunch is almost ready."

Johnny nodded and walked back down the dock. He waved at Daniel. When Daniel paused and started treading water he then jerked his hand back to point towards the shore, towards the table next to the grill and the chairs. Then he pointed out at Mr. Miyagi.

Daniel disappeared beneath the surface, and Johnny waited. He watched as Daniel popped up next to Mr. Miyagi's boat. Watched as Daniel pulled himself up and into the boat. As Mr. Miyagi pulled back his line and set his fishing rod aside.

He wondered how Daniel had the energy. He was exhausted just from watching Daniel. He'd been swimming nonstop for nearly an hour. He hugged his arms to his chest. There was a breeze, a cold one. It was colder here, further out from the valley, it was greener.

Daniel took over rowing. Rowed them back to the dock and Tommy appeared again at Johnny's side.

He threw a jacket over Johnny's shoulders.

"Don't you dare get sick again," Tommy said.

He was holding a towel and handed it to Johnny. "For Daniel."

Lifelong

Chapter Notes

> ♥□♥□♥□ Zahra-art painted the forehead touch from chapter 32 you can see it and the progress video here: https://desolateice.tumblr.com/post/658969827022618624

All Daniel had really been promised about California was swimming. He'd get to swim. He'd get to hang out in a pool. All year long.

But the only time he got near water was to train. He didn't swim. So while he was playing whatever the game was that Johnny wanted to play, fancy rich person mini-golf, he was staring at the water.

He wanted to swim.

And it was great. It would've been better if Johnny had joined him. But he didn't want Johnny getting sick again. He'd spent days at Johnny's side, making sure he ate. Concerned when he woke up with coughing fits until Mr. Miyagi showed him the medicine that helped.

He'd had a lot of time to think. Quietly at Johnny's side.

One day, he'd get to go swimming again and he'd drag Johnny with him.

He watched Johnny as he sat on the pier. Feet kicking at the water. Watched as Bobby talked to him, Dutch, as they both came and went. As he put on sunscreen. As Johnny shoved them into the water and walked off. That playful way they always had among one another. As Dutch swam out to him and asked him out of curiosity if Daniel knew how two guys had sex with one another. Wondered if Dutch was flirting or had his eyes on someone. But he could help. He *did* know the answer to those questions. He probably got the best sex-ed talk out of all the kids in Jersey. By the way Dutch turned red he wondered if maybe it hadn't been an earnest question but just a casual one. Like a kid who wanted to know where babies came from only to double-check that they came from people and not a stork until after you gave them the details. Oh well. He now knew everything.

He swam until it was time to come back in, until Johnny came back to the pier and waved at him. Calling him quietly back to shore. The way he stood waiting for Daniel. Like Daniel was a sailor coming back

from a long journey, the way those women would stand on the coast looking out at sea waiting for the ship to come in. He swam to Mr. Miyagi and hoisted himself into the boat. He wouldn't make Johnny wait nearly as long.

"Have fun?" Mr. Miyagi asked.

"Yes," Daniel said with a smile as he rowed. "You?"

Mr. Miyagi opened the lid to the cooler, it was full of fish. "Great fishing."

He turned his gaze back to the docks. A jacket was around Johnny now and Tommy was waiting, kneeling. When they got close Tommy helped tie the boat off and held it for Daniel to step off the boat and onto the dock. For Mr. Miyagi.

"Lunch is done," Johnny said to Daniel, offering him a towel that Daniel took.

Daniel gathered up his things while Tommy took the cooler from Mr. Miyagi to carry. They walked back up the dock together and sat at the picnic table. Jimmy hoisted a large tray over to the table with hot dogs and burgers.

Jimmy set it down and then looked up at the house, cupping his hands around his mouth.

"Lunch is ready, get back here!" Jimmy shouted, then turned to Tommy. "Will you get the cooler up here so they can pick their drinks?"

Tommy grabbed their cooler and set it down on the table, popping it open, and slid it across for Mr. Miyagi and Daniel to look at.

"Johnny requested I save a bunch of those for you," Jimmy said.

There were colorful glass bottles in the melting ice water, Daniel didn't recognize them and turned to Mr. Miyagi.

"Oh," Mr. Miyagi said. He very carefully reached in and pulled out a blue bottle. "Thank you Jimmy-san. Very thoughtful."

"What is it?" Daniel asked.

Mr. Miyagi smiled, removing the cover and opening a piece of plastic. "Ramune, Japanese soda." He placed the piece of plastic in his palm

and set it over the lid and pushed down. A marble was knocked loose and the soda fizzed.

Daniel looked back in the cooler and grabbed a bright green one and held it up, it was all in Japanese. "What flavor is this one?"

"Melon," Miyagi and Jimmy said at the same time.

"Ah, Jimmy-san read Japanese?" Miyagi asked.

"Oh, no, not really. I've learned all the flavors. I have to for different drinks. My Dad quizzes me on it every year, so that if I take over when I'm older I can explain what every flavor is. But these, because of the marble, were one of my favorites as a kid, so I know them the best."

"Favorite?"

Jimmy dug out a clear one. "I like the lychee one."

Mr. Miyagi hummed his approval and Johnny reached over and grabbed a blue one but it was different from Mr. Miyagi's.

"What flavor is that one?" Daniel asked.

"Blueberry," Johnny said.

Daniel looked at the melon soda in his hand and carefully opened it, studying the piece of plastic and the ball at the top.

"You gotta give it a lot of pressure," Jimmy explained as Tommy grabbed his.

Daniel pulled the piece of plastic apart and put his palm over it and pressed it over the ball. Nothing happened. He frowned. He tried again. Harder. More pressure. The piece of plastic sunk in and he heard the clink of the ball dropping loose into the drink, against the glass, and the hiss of the carbonation. He grinned.

He noticed movement, Bobby and Dutch returning from the house. Holding glass containers, plates, and cutlery.

"And what creation is this from the Browns?" Tommy asked amused as the container was set at the end of the table.

"Lemon tart," Bobby said tapping at it.

Plates were passed around while Jimmy pointed out the food in the center of the table. "We've got American hot dogs, burgers with grilled onions, and some South African boerewors. This is my first attempt at those, so blame me if you don't like it. The butcher guy gave me like an hour-long conversation on how to cook them properly, so I hope I did okay. Also grilled some other veggies, asparagus, potato, Brussel sprouts, bell peppers, zucchini, and eggplant. So eat some vegetables too," Jimmy said, looking pointedly at the guys. "Tommy marinated and seasoned those, so all complaints on flavor go to him."

"Hey," Tommy said with a frown.

Daniel smiled. They were funny. The same, as always.

There was tension. He knew they knew. Bobby was very clearly keeping himself distant. Whole other end of the table. But that was okay.

He moved his leg, pressing it against Johnny's. He was there. They both were. And he was warm. Not hot. Just a normal temperature. Which was a relief.

Spring break was practically over and all his plans were gone but it was okay. It'd be okay. Johnny wasn't pushing him away. The door hadn't shut forever.

The food was good. The company was good.

Mr. Miyagi was hmming, listening to the guys talk.

Once upon a time, he thought Mr. Miyagi was lonely like him. Needed people in his life, just like Daniel did. That they had each other and that was good enough. A sensei and student. Then he saw how other sensei's and students interacted. How Kreese treated Johnny. It wasn't the same. He was grateful it wasn't the same. Daniel and Mr. Miyagi were friends, almost family. It was kind of fun to see him with the ex-cobras. Them tripping over themselves to be polite. Trained. Like Johnny had been. Yes sirs, no sirs. Halfway molded into what Kreese was trying to turn them into.

Mr. Miyagi's atatatata's, gentle no's *not sir*. A gentle admonish, a gentle shift.

They were different than Johnny. They had sturdy roots, steady homes. And they were like the type of tree that helps a damaged tree continue to grow, supporting it.

"Last year the seniors went to D.C.," Tommy was saying. "Student council is still trying to finalize our plans this year."

"Did they decide where we're going?" Bobby asked.

"Maybe," Tommy said smiling. He picked up his burger and took a bite.

"Maybe? You know where we're going don't you!" Bobby said standing. "Tell me, I gotta know."

"Sit down," Jimmy said.

Bobby sat back down. "You look like you're too pleased with yourself. Where are we going? The Bahamas?"

Tommy shook his head.

"A cruise?" Dutch asked.

"Mexico?"

"No."

"Europe?"

"No."

"We're not going camping, are we? You know the girls hate that. Not all of them, but like some of them will just whine the whole time," Jimmy said.

"No," Tommy said.

"A college town?" Bobby asked amused.

"Not really," Tommy said thoughtfully.

"Canada?"

"No."

"Come on tell us! I gotta start picking out clothes man," Bobby complained. "It's next month. If I need a new wardrobe I got to get on that."

Tommy smiled, eyes falling on Daniel. It was an evil smile. One way

too pleased with himself. A Cheshire's grin. A cat who'd caught a mouse.

"New York City," Johnny said.

Daniel felt his heart skip a beat.

No. Of course not. It couldn't be.

Tommy held up a finger gun and winked. "Prize goes to Johnny Lawrence."

"What?!"

It wasn't just Bobby. Daniel had felt the same incredulous feeling sprout up. His home turf. The whole senior class was going to leave sunny California and was heading home with him.

"Mmm New York, good city to visit," Mr. Miyagi said nodding. "Good choice. Far from California. Different."

"Yup we're flying out and so far we've got all the touristy tours signed up. But we're still trying to figure out everything. We're all California locals so I've been trying to find an expert. Someone from the area might be able to give some other advice on things to do. I don't know. Maybe this kid who talks about the area *all the time*. Might be able to come to some council meeting and give some insight. Maybe after the break is over?"

"Me?" Daniel asked, it was practically a whisper.

"I was actually thinking Mr. Miyagi, I mean he said it's a good spot for a visit. So he *must've* been there before," Tommy said turning to Mr. Miyagi.

Mr. Miyagi laughed. "Oh no, not an expert."

"Your face is hilarious," Tommy said laughing looking back at Daniel. "Of course *you* man."

Daniel felt like he was going to burst. They were going to New York. They'd be within a short trip of New Jersey, of Newark. He could drag Johnny over the river, show him the place he grew up in. Could introduce him to his grandparents. They could get real pizza. Eat bagels with lox. Could drag him to his favorite shop to have cheesecake. He could show him Central Park. There were too many

things to do.

"Since it's an actual school field trip the teachers want some history and culture and learning and stuff," Tommy said with a sigh. "So the history teacher has requested we stop by Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, they're trying to figure out if we can get tickets to a show because parents will want us to go see something on Broadway even though it's as expensive as hell...sorry Mr. Miyagi. They also want us to go to museums. But you've probably been to a lot of it, so I figured you could help give us good advice, show us what's worth it and what's actually just overhyped. That way we don't end up boring you either by going to all the places you've been to a thousand times and are sick of."

"How'd you manage New York City?" Dutch asked. He was grinning.

"I have my ways. I can be persuasive. Did you not listen to me during the debate?"

"Honestly? Fell asleep," Dutch said.

Tommy frowned.

"Hey, I still voted for you."

"I thought you voted for me because you believed in what I was talking about."

"Nah man, voted for you because we're friends."

"I don't look forward to when you start voting in elections," Tommy said sourly.

"You said the same thing when I learned to drive."

"You're a menace to society. Anyway, Daniel, if you're free, after spring break, after school could you come to some meetings?"

"Sure, I'd like that," Daniel said. It was an understatement. He couldn't wait.

"Can't believe we're almost done," Johnny said.

Daniel looked at him, surprised. He sounded so melancholy.

"We've got the senior trip, then prom and then we graduate. Then boom, done, it's over."

"Life not over Johnny-san, just high school," Mr. Miyagi said gently.

Johnny looked surprised but nodded. "Yeah...it's just an end."

"Enjoy it now. Remember later. After everything over."

Daniel studied Johnny. Daniel couldn't wait for school to be over. Couldn't wait to move on. He could do anything. What exactly he didn't know.

He wondered if he'd stayed in Newark if he'd feel sadder about graduating. About everyone splitting up. But his mother had moved them so he'd gotten uprooted early. To feel that shift beneath his feet. To do all his protesting early.

It was in Johnny's eyes, a little spark of sadness.

"What are you going to do after school?" Daniel asked Johnny.

"I...don't know," Johnny said.

That was it. Everything changed after high school. Friends scattered. And those left behind cracked a little.

"Me either," Daniel said. He gave Johnny a soft smile.

Daniel was used to it. He embraced his future of freedom. But he'd gotten used to being a seed on the wind. Johnny had probably never left California. Daniel had traveled across the USA in his mother's old beat-up car that they had to give a running start.

He'd help. Give Johnny a running start. They could do things together. He wouldn't leave. And those ex-cobras, he doubted they'd leave Johnny alone too long. They were, attached as Ali said.

Daniel picked up his soda, listening to the clink of the marble against the glass.

"And that's okay. I think anyway. I like to look at it as freedom. I can do anything. I can work. I can travel. I can go to college. I can just bum around for a bit. I won't have to get up and go to school. I mean I don't particularly *like* school. I don't like sitting still. I like moving. I like talking. I find it restrictive. You know? It's a chance for new things. But it doesn't mean *everything* ends. It means I can take the things I like and keep them. I can visit Mr. Miyagi. I can still go driving around LA. You can do the same. I think when you graduate

you'll take that Avanti and help them," he pointed his bottle at the cobras, "move into their dorms. You'll hang around campus, visit for fun events, and then maybe you'll drive around. Maybe you'll come to visit Mr. Miyagi and me. Maybe you'll work in a garden shop, maybe you'll work with animals, maybe you'll just stand on the beach looking pretty and people will throw money at you. But you'll be able to do what you want. I'm sure you'll still all meet up at the lodge in the winter and you'll have so much to talk about. How your year went. How classes are going. How your jobs are going. You'll get on your bikes and you'll ride around. You'll go camping. You'll go to bars and meet up."

It was quiet. He looked down at the marble.

"I talked to Ali. We had brunch. It was a good talk. She said you guys have the weirdest friendship she's ever seen. But it makes me think it's deep, you know? Like family. But a family you choose. One that shows up and keeps showing up. She said *they hold grudges* even when she didn't think they would. Like a dog with a bone practically. *They don't give it up.* Because you're *important* to them. And vice versa. I'm sure. I left a lot of stuff behind in Newark. Family, Dad, friends. And none of my friends have reached out. The whole time I've been here. I begged Ma for my new phone number before we left. Passed it around. All the kids I talked to all the time. Only Louie calls. Wracks up Ma's phone bill. But he's family. Blood. It was disappointing. But who knows? It might feel exactly the same if I go back. Like I never left. And it might not. It might be completely different. But you guys. I think you'll call. I think you'll show up. It's that kind of friendship. The lifelong kind."

"Damnit," Bobby muttered

Daniel looked up.

"That was sweet Daniel," Tommy said warmly.

"You crying Brown?" Dutch asked.

"Shut up," Bobby said. He was rubbing his face. He popped open the tart container and slid it down. "Just eat the tart and leave me alone."

Johnny took it, cutting it into slices and moving it onto plates.

"You really think?" he asked Daniel softly. Passing the plates out.

"Yeah. I do."

They finished eating. Mr. Miyagi offered to leave some of the fish so Jimmy could cook them. Jimmy made him take some meat in exchange. Filling up a cooler with stuff from the butcher, vegetables, and ramune.

They invited Daniel to stay the night but Daniel declined. He knew his mother was worried. He'd not come home so suddenly. Just left and Mr. Miyagi had called and told her that Johnny was sick. She'd understood. But he had to check in with her.

Daniel needed to think. Needed to plan.

Johnny was staying. The guys had taken his bags into the Lakehouse and he was holding his bonsai. They'd drive him back Sunday to get his Avanti. But they'd keep him till then.

They'd waved goodbye to Mr. Miyagi and Daniel and left just the three of them.

"After spring break over, when feeling better, Johnny-san come to house," Mr. Miyagi said softly, closing the trunk and handing the keys to the Nash to Daniel.

"Of course," Johnny said.

"We learn kata," Mr. Miyagi said. "Daniel-san and Johnny-san.

Daniel looked between the two of them in shock. It was time? Already? No. *Finally*. Finally, he and Johnny would be learning together. Finally, they'd be moving forward.

"Know what Kata is?" Mr. Miyagi asked.

"Uh, yeah, it's like choreography," Johnny said.

His blue eyes were wide. He looked stunned. Shocked. But there was hope mixed in there. Daniel grinned.

"Many many many types of kata. We start basic. But Johnny-san must sleep. Must take care of self, hmm?"

"Yes," Johnny said. "I will."

Mr. Miyagi nodded, a little hmm of approval. "Good."

He made his way to the passenger seat door and sat down in the car, leaving Daniel to stand in front of Johnny fiddling with the keys. He

should go. Take Mr. Miyagi home. Go home and talk to his mother.

"Hey thanks, it was nice to get to swim. Enjoy the rest of your spring break," Daniel said turning.

Johnny reached out, hand ever so gently grazing his forearm.

Daniel paused looking back.

Johnny's eyes were full of concern, worry.

"Is it okay?"

"Huh?"

"Me. Learning with Mr. Miyagi? Are you okay with that? Learning with you?"

Daniel smiled. "3 months ago? Hell no. Would've used it as an excuse to trip you and take little jabs. But now? Yeah. I'm looking forward to it."

"Really?"

Johnny looked hopeful. The start of it. He'd help that grow. Tend to it. Because he knew what Johnny looked like when he was actually happy. When he was having fun. When he wasn't holding back or hiding.

"Really," Daniel said. He took Johnny's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Training with Mr. Miyagi is different. It's all defense. All inner balance and inner peace. Calming. But it's still nice. Fun. Might be a bit slow compared to Cobra Kai. But I hope you like it. Do you want to learn it?"

He didn't pull his hand away. Maybe he hadn't destroyed things as badly as he'd thought. Johnny had held out his hand to him earlier. Had told him he was still welcome. Kept trying to tell it was okay. That everything was fine. Maybe he meant that.

"I do. I... didn't think I could. I thought I'd have to give up karate completely." Johnny was looking out at the lake. "Thought it was over. That it just ended before everything else did. But I hoped, foolishly, like all other hopes...that maybe Mr. Miyagi would teach me what he taught you. So I could be more like him. More like you."

Daniel's eyes stung. So pretty. So sad. Damnit.

He pulled on Johnny's hand, moving to avoid the bonsai, so it wouldn't get crushed between them, giving him a hug. Arms wrapping around Johnny's torso again. Second time that day.

He remembered. The second day of Johnny being sick. The way he'd woken up. The soft way he'd said, "You didn't leave." In a tone of awe. Like he'd expected Daniel to leave. Like he was used to it. To people leaving. He wouldn't ever do that again. Not in that way. There'd always be a promise of return.

Johnny shifted, presumably moving the bonsai into a safe position and his arm came around Daniel. It stayed there, secure, and then there was that pat pat that made Daniel laugh. That awkward *I don't know how to handle this.*

"You shouldn't want to be like me. I'm a mess," Daniel said softly.

"Aren't we all?" Johnny asked.

Daniel laughed. He didn't want to leave. But he had to. He took a deep breath, full of Johnny, and stepped back. "I will see you at school. I'm going to take Mr. Miyagi home, get the Ford and then go home. Ma had some stuff she wanted to do. But Monday. School."

"I'll see you then."

Daniel climbed into the car. They'd get there.

He pulled away from Jimmy's lake house and waved at Johnny.

They'd start with kata. They'd learn under Mr. Miyagi, and he'd help right them back up. Back to where they were. And then Daniel would take a step closer. Then another. And he'd take hold of Johnny's hand and he wouldn't ever let go.

Starting Kata

Johnny missed Daniel when he left.

They'd spent so much time together since January that having the weekend and the rest of Friday without him felt like there was a vacuum in his life.

The guys brought all the bedding out of the bedrooms and dumped it on the living room floor. The one with the skylight so they could all sleep there and stare up at the stars. It was nice.

But Johnny wished Daniel was there. He was so used to seeing him. At school. At Mr. Miyagi's. It was too quiet without him. Too silent. Not just in the air. He didn't just miss the noise of his voice, but the way he was constantly moving. All up in Johnny's space. It was lonely. Even with the guys.

"You asleep?" Tommy asked quietly from beside him, rolling over onto his side.

"No," Johnny said.

"Thinking about Daniel?"

Johnny blushed. Was he that obvious?

Tommy laughed softly. As quiet as could be. "You're easy to read when you know what to look for."

Johnny covered his face with his hands.

"You keep looking out the window like a dog waiting for its owner to come back."

Johnny sighed. He hated it. But it *was* how he felt.

"I've got plans," Tommy said softly. "If you can just go with it."

Johnny glanced over at Tommy.

"I plan, okay?" Tommy whispered. "And I've got two cards up my sleeve. Well thought out. And it might not move the needle much, but it'll give me a better idea of where we are. Or really where you are."

Johnny stared at him.

"I... there are things I noticed at the lodge and they gave me ideas. So just, go with it okay? Don't give up yet. I know you want to move slow. I'm not going to push you. But I'm going to create...scenarios. So don't get mad."

"I'm not going to get mad."

"Don't promise something you can't keep," Tommy said, an amused smile on his lips. "But tell me, what did Mr. Miyagi and Daniel tell you?"

"Oh...uhh...next weekend...Mr. Miyagi is going to teach me kata." Johnny felt bad that he was going to learn karate without them. Away from them.

"Kata," Tommy said testing it out on his tongue. "What's that?"

"Type of karate," Jimmy said pushing himself up.

Johnny sat up as well, concern etching itself into his skin. He felt a hand slap his leg.

"Congrats man," Dutch said sleepily. "You enjoy that."

"You're okay with it?" Johnny asked.

"You need it," Bobby said. "Cobra Kai is over, we're fine."

"Are you...are you sure? I never- We never talked about-" Johnny started.

"Yeah," Tommy said stretching beside him. "We quit because *we* were done. We didn't want to be around Kreese anymore. And if you were going we were going."

"And like Daniel said today. We don't need karate to be friends. It just introduced us to one another. It's not like we *only* hung out at karate. We moved schools to all be together. We hang out all the time. So you enjoy those lessons with Mr. Miyagi," Jimmy said.

"And Daniel," Dutch said, tone sickly sweet.

"Thanks," Johnny said softly, laying back down, looking back up at the stars through the skylight. Feeling a little lighter.

It took Johnny a while to pick out what to wear to his first kata lesson with Mr. Miyagi (and Daniel). His mother stopped by and leaned against the doorframe of his room amused. Watching him lay out his clothes.

"Whatcha doing?" she asked.

"I've got kata today with Mr. Miyagi."

"*And* Daniel?"

"Yes."

"Mmm...so you're trying to figure out what you look nice in?"

"Yes."

"and you're working out?"

"Kind of."

"The sky blue one," she said ruffling his hair with her manicured nails. "Have fun. Be good."

He nodded and changed. She was right. The blues always looked nice. He thought about grabbing his black band, to keep his hair out of his eyes. But he didn't want to go in that box. It'd been such a long time. So he went without.

The drive was peaceful. The skies were clear and sunny. If he wasn't careful that hope was going to bloom into wildflowers.

He parked. The Ford was in the lot.

He wondered where he should go. Into the back? Or through the front? The door opened and Daniel leaned out, a warm smile on his face.

"Good morning Johnny."

"Morning."

Daniel hopped down the steps. Energized.

He took Johnny's hand and led him around through the back to the

garden. Johnny set his bonsai on the little stand he was beginning to think of as where his bonsai went when he visited. The perfect spot for sunlight.

Daniel watched him amused.

The doors to the house slid open and Mr. Miyagi walked out. Johnny turned. He bowed. Mr. Miyagi smiled and bowed back.

Mr. Miyagi showed them the steps, the movement in the garden, and Johnny followed. It reminded him of dancing. A cross between the two. Karate and dancing.

Mr. Miyagi made it look easy. Fluid. Everything flowed simply.

It wasn't easy. Not the way Kreese talked about kata. Like it was something simple and unnecessary.

Johnny felt a little choppy as he followed Mr. Miyagi's movements. Focusing on taking what he knew and applying it, trying to find the pattern, the flow.

"Breathe," Mr. Miyagi said softly.

Johnny did. Following the movements. He was surprised that he broke a sweat. It *seemed* easy. But by the afternoon, his muscles were burning in the nice way a good workout made them.

Mr. Miyagi bowed and they bowed back.

"Miyagi make bento," he said as the two sat down on the wooden platform in the garden, "for lunch."

Mr. Miyagi passed out the boxes.

Johnny opened his carefully taking in the fish and rice, the little salad to the side.

"Thank you, Mr. Miyagi."

The rice was speckled. There was something mixed into it. It was different than normal, rounded into triangles of rice. Johnny took his chopsticks towards it.

"Atatata," Mr. Miyagi said and Johnny stopped looking up. He knew that sound. "Onigiri, no chopsticks, pick up and eat," Mr. Miyagi said picking up his and taking a bite. It all stayed together.

Johnny looked down at the rounded triangles, picked one, and picked it up. It didn't fall apart in his hands like he'd expected. He took a bite.

"Many types," Mr. Miyagi said. "Some have different flavors. This is simple, some seaweed."

Johnny thought of the seaweed he saw on the beaches that looked waxy and slimy. This was different, crunchier. Salty. He liked it.

Daniel was eating his and talking. Feet swinging on the board. He was talking about the New York trip, about the places he'd told Tommy and the rest of the student council they should go to. That they were being given free time for small groups to go places. How exciting it was. How close they'd be to where he grew up. That he'd talked to his uncle and his cousin for six hours so that Daniel didn't miss anything. His grandparents too. Oh, poor Mrs. LaRusso's phone bill. They came up with ideas of places to go and places to eat.

Johnny watched him fondly. The way he was talking with his hands. One hand holding the onigiri close while the other waved about. Then all that focus fell on Johnny and his heart pounded so loudly in his ears.

"What are you excited to do in New York?"

Be with you. See everything through your eyes.

"I trust that you'll make sure we don't miss anything important," Johnny said.

"You've never had dreams of New York?"

Johnny shook his head. "I figured I'd never leave California. New York is pretty far by car. But you know that."

"It is! It's too long! But we got to see the Grand Canyon. And we stopped at all these little things along the way. To try and make it fun. But I was so miserable the whole way," Daniel said with a soft laugh.

"You were uprooted," Johnny said softly. "It's difficult."

Daniel studied him for a moment then nodded taking a big bite of his onigiri. "It is."

Mr. Miyagi nodded as well. "Take while to get used to. But with time,

flourish." He motioned around the garden with a smile.

"Yeah, you had a real big uprooting Mr. Miyagi, when did you move?"

Mr. Miyagi thought about it for a second. "When Daniel-san's age, Miyagi arrive in Hawaii."

He had that distant look in his eyes he got sometimes while thinking about the past. Bittersweet. Hawaii was another place Johnny hadn't ever been to. His mother had. Sid took her for their honeymoon. He spent two weeks alone at the mansion. His own honeymoon, full of excitement and hope for the future. The thought that he might have a dad for the first time in his life.

"Is Hawaii nice?" Johnny asked.

"Hai, remind Miyagi of Okinawa."

Johnny nodded, setting his hand on the wood beneath him, to lean against that arm. He gazed out at the garden. Mr. Miyagi probably made this place for himself *after*. After moving, after war, a peaceful place where he could sit and watch things grow, flourish.

Kreese, after war, opened a dojo. Probably driven by fear of war. Wanting to prepare the youth around him for the nightmares he had.

But Miyagi wanted peace. Not to prepare for another battle.

18. *At 18*, just a little older than Johnny Mr. Miyagi had moved far from home. And then just a little later probably, gone off to war, to fight for his new country. Johnny couldn't even imagine. But he could imagine wanting to set out roots somewhere, to try and carve out a place of peace.

Fingers touched his. It felt electric, even such a simple touch. He didn't dare move. Didn't want to draw attention to it. Just to savor it.

Daniel was asking about fruit, the stuff he knew about Hawaii. Talking about food. Johnny looked over. He was wondering about Hawaiian cuisine.

Johnny finished his bento and set it aside. The air always felt cleaner at Mr. Miyagi's. He thought it was because of all the plants. Mr. Miyagi said he could make one of the dishes he remembered. He'd only been in Hawaii a short time, before moving to California, before attending college at Santa Barbara University. Johnny tried thinking

of a young Mr. Miyagi, new to the country studying in California while war loomed like a dark cloud. It had to have been awful.

Mr. Miyagi stood up. "Continue with kata?"

Johnny blinked and nodded standing up and gathering up the remains of his bento.

"We'll clean up first," Daniel offered, taking his and Mr. Miyagi's bento and walking down the platform towards the house.

"Thank you for lunch," Johnny said before trailing after him.

The kitchen was a bit small for the two of them. Kept them too close. Johnny washed the boxes and the chopsticks and Daniel dried them and put them away since he knew where everything went. Johnny could feel him beside him. the warmth of him, the feel of his arm as he brushed close, his shoulder against Johnny's. His heart was pounding, he tried to focus on his breathing. It'd be so easy to just turn, to tip his head, lift Daniel's chin and kiss him. A soft gentle kiss.

He pushed down the urge. Their last kiss was still sparking ripples of pain. He couldn't.

They returned to where Mr. Miyagi was and worked through the kata. The steps they'd learned before. Johnny knew they'd practice it until they mastered it. Until it was as fluid and easy as Mr. Miyagi's. And then maybe they might learn another. Then maybe they'd spar. It felt like choreography.

It reminded him of sitting on the catwalks during rehearsals with Ali, watching actors dance below, seeing their fights from a different view, the way they spun and lunged, whirling this way and that.

The day ended faster than Johnny expected. He would've thought that doing kata would make the day slow and sticky like molasses. That it'd take forever. But it was easy to get lost in it. Johnny could focus. He could focus on something for a long time. But to do so feeling so utterly calm, so utterly refreshed was new. Breathing was easier. He wondered if it was the kata, or being in Mr. Miyagi's garden doing kata.

He'd practice, at home, in the quiet of his room and he'd know.

Johnny and Daniel bowed to Mr. Miyagi as the sun began to set. Practice over. Training over. Lesson over.

Daniel had dinner with his mother, Daniel was saying, but he was dragging his feet. Not ready to go. Not ready to leave.

Johnny understood. It was like a bubble. Perfect and iridescent and he didn't want it to pop. Someone would have to leave first. Maybe they'd have to go at the same time. It'd be easier. Maybe.

He had to just move. One foot in front of the other.

He could grab dinner at a drive-through. Or get tacos and sit on the beach watching the tide.

"Thank you, Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said.

Mr. Miyagi smiled and nodded.

Johnny turned, just ever so slightly. "Have a good evening," he said.

He picked up his bonsai and headed to the gate. He could leave first. Daniel should have time alone with Mr. Miyagi if he wanted it. He heard steps following him.

"Good night Mr. Miyagi," Daniel said. Daniel was moving ahead of him, pushing the gate open and then holding it open for him, smiling warmly at him. His slowed, calmed heartbeat stirred fast at that look.

"What are you going to do?" Daniel asked him softly as Johnny passed.

"I'm thinking tacos on the beach," Johnny said quietly.

Daniel clicked his tongue in disapproval.

"There's nothing wrong with eating tacos on the beach," Johnny said.

He did it a lot. There was a little shop he frequented. The tacos were cheap. But well made by the little old lady who he thought owned it. He'd had to learn a little Spanish to order them. The first time he'd ordered he'd tripped over the words as he tried to read the sign that she laughed, and he hadn't a clue what he'd ended up with but it was delicious. He was better at it now. Had learned she also made coconut ice cream and he hadn't found anything else like it. He had been slowly working his way through the menu.

"You should come to eat with me and Ma," Daniel said. "She always makes too much food."

Johnny frowned. He really wanted those tacos now. But, he wasn't going to turn down Daniel. He couldn't. It was harder than trying to push a boulder up a hill.

"Okay, but you have to join me for tacos then. You can't disapprove of my favorite taco stand without trying it."

Daniel studied him for a moment then grinned. "Deal. Let's go to my home then. Ma will be happy."

Johnny set his bonsai carefully in the Avanti and followed Daniel's Ford to the Seven Seas Apartment complex.

He felt awkward. He didn't have anything in his hands. He always had things in his hands. Every time he visited the Mills he had something. Flowers, wine, champagne, or fancy cheese or chocolates. He didn't have anything for Mrs. LaRusso. Nothing to give her as an apology for him just showing up on her doorstep. Nothing as *thank you for letting me join you for dinner*.

He was starting to get antsy. His hands were sweating. He breathed. Bobby had told him he didn't have to be useful. He could just be. He could just try and be good company.

He could offer to do the dishes.

He parked and put the hood up on the Avanti, locking the bonsai in. He hesitated. No, it'd be safe.

He turned, Daniel was watching him with those dark brown eyes.

"You okay?" Daniel asked.

He didn't want to say. Didn't know how to explain that he suddenly didn't know what to do with his hands. That he was used to carrying stuff. Used to trying to make himself useful.

"Are you sure this is okay? Coming over sudden like this?"

He never could, when he was younger have people over suddenly. They didn't have enough food. Their apartment wasn't nice enough. And then Sid...well his friends had to sneak in. Ali came when she wanted. But he never invited his friends to dinner. He'd invited Ali to dinner, but he had to call ahead. So he didn't embarrass Sid by feeding her frozen food. Even though she *liked* frozen food. Even though she was fine with mini pizzas nuked in the microwave. Sid always wanted

her to have fresh salmon or steak. It always became a show.

God his hands were sweaty. He rubbed them on his pants.

Daniel smiled at him. "It's fine. Trust me."

Johnny did. Daniel could lead him off a cliff and he'd follow. His mother would be pissed. But he'd do it. Maybe Mrs. LaRusso would have something for him to do. He'd gotten very good at changing light bulbs. Fixing leaky sinks.

He followed Daniel up the stairs to number 20. Daniel just opened the door. Johnny wasn't used to not knocking on that door. He felt like he was breaking in.

Daniel walked in, saw him standing on the doorstep lost, and grabbed him, pulling him in with a laugh on his lips.

"It's okay," he said again. Daniel turned towards the kitchen, hands-on Johnny's arms. "Ma, Johnny's joining us for dinner."

"Welcome Johnny!" she called turning from where she was at work in the kitchen and grinning. "Come in, come in, make yourself at home! Got about a half-hour left I'd say until it's done."

"Thank you for having me Mrs. LaRusso," Johnny said.

Daniel was tugging on him, pulling him deeper into the house.

Mrs. LaRusso laughed. "Of course dear."

Johnny thought his heart was going to explode. He was so nervous. He wasn't paying attention to where he was going. It smelled amazing though, whatever Mrs. LaRusso was making.

Then a door was being opened and he was dragged along. Daniel's room. He'd been in there once before. When Daniel had been drunk, totally asleep. He hadn't taken as much of it in as he'd wanted. Not the posters on the walls, not the books on the shelves, not the homework on the desk. He'd seen the first place trophy had been moved from the living room. He looked at it.

It was bittersweet. He was proud of Daniel. But not proud of himself.

He wasn't sure if it counted as the worst day of his life. But it was there. High up there.

He took in the soccer ball in the corner. Photos. Daniel and his Mom and Dad. Johnny turned. His closet was open slightly. Johnny could see the white gi, the white hachimaki with the flower on it. A radio sat on the desk. A bonsai sat on one of the shelves. Johnny studied it. It was different from his, a different type of tree. But clearly well cared for.

"Did you do the English homework?" Daniel asked.

He was sitting at ease on his bed. Like this was nothing. Like there weren't a million small pieces of Daniel scattered around the room that Johnny could explore. A million things that were little keys to who he was, parts of who he was and would become.

English.

"It was reading homework right?" Johnny asked.

Neurons weren't firing properly. It smelled like Daniel. Everything.

He'd done the reading. But he couldn't remember what it was. He would come Monday. But right now he was wondering a million things.

What station the radio was set to, if he turned it on would it be loud or quiet? Would it be rock? Would it be pop? Would it be country or rap? Blues? Polka? What did Daniel leave his radio on? What music did he like while he studied?

How dusty was that soccer ball? Could Daniel teach Johnny how to do that trick? The one he'd taught Ali on the beach? Probably not inside. He still didn't know where a good place to play soccer was. Johnny wasn't good at it. But maybe. Maybe they could play together. When Daniel's knee was better. Could you play one on one?

Daniel was worrying his lower lip again. Staring at Johnny.

Johnny didn't know what to do with himself, so he pulled the desk chair back and sat down. It felt weird to stand and stare at a sitting Daniel. Uneven. He looked at the school books on his desk. *Pride and Prejudice.* Right. He picked up the book.

"It's so boring," Daniel complained.

Johnny blinked. He'd skipped ahead. He'd stayed up late reading it. He hadn't finished it yet. He smiled softly.

"It picks up."

"Does it?"

"It's a romantic drama. About preconceptions and class. "

"Huh," Daniel said. "You don't care that our teacher gave us a 400-page book to read as homework two months before we graduate?"

"No. I'll probably finish it soon."

"Seriously?" Daniel asked, he was leaning forward. "How? Do you sleep?"

"Not much honestly."

"Johnny!" Daniel sounded like Bobby for a second. Scandalized. The sound of a lecture coming. Johnny flicked through the pages of the soft paperback looking for Daniel's bookmark, wondering where he was in the book. He was calmer now.

"There's too much I want to do," Johnny said softly. *And nightmares I don't want to have*.

He couldn't find the bookmark. He turned to Daniel. "Have you not even started?"

"I tried. First page. It's hard to read. It's all stuffy. Like Shakespeare."

Johnny frowned. He flipped back to the first page. "It's a bit confusing because people go by their last names and so women are all the titled the same. But once you get going..." He flicked on the desk light, it was getting dark in the room. "It is a truth, universally acknowledged...."

Sometimes reading aloud helped. Sometimes he and the guys, before they started going to school together would go to the park after school. The guys would shove a book in his hands and he'd read. They'd take notes. A little study group. They'd do it for math too. Compare notes even though they went to different schools. They'd find the crossover.

He was used to Dutch whining about the reading. A similar complaint about stuffy language, over tricky language. They'd pry it apart together and search for the meaning. The metaphors their teachers were looking for. The hidden meanings. Five heads were better than

one. It was a habit now. Someone complained about reading meant someone else was going to read it aloud.

There was a knock on the door and he jumped, startled. He got a glimpse of Daniel. How he'd been sitting with his head in his hands, elbows on his knees staring at Johnny as he read aloud, suddenly pulling back and looking past him. Johnny turned. Mrs. LaRusso was smiling warmly from the open door.

"Dinner's ready."

Johnny looked for a bookmark. Found a scrap piece of paper and stuck it in the book and shut it on the desk. Daniel was up, pulling Johnny along, out of his room and to the dining room table to sit between him and his mother. A small table. Like the one in the kitchen Sid didn't like. Cozy.

A big pan was put in the middle of the table. There was bread set out in a basket and Mrs. LaRusso pulled the lid off the pan. Steam rose. It looked like porridge. It looked like what Mr. Miyagi had made Johnny when he'd been sick. But it was green.

"Risotto," Mrs. LaRusso said. "My spring Risotto. Lots of vegetables and some homemade pesto. How'd your lessons go?"

Daniel talked about kata. Talked about Mr. Miyagi and Johnny ate.

It was comforting food. Something he thought he'd like to eat at the lodge.

Daniel talked about their lunch, explained the onigiri. His mother listened, nodding. Asking questions. Heading out onto tangents about similar foods. That reminded her of restaurants, that reminded her of people, of places, of stories. The conversation was a gentle tug of war. Each going off on things the topic reminded them of. Until Johnny found himself listening to them discussing the museums in New Jersey, the big dinosaur at the entrance of a museum. And if Johnny hadn't been following along, if he'd stepped out of the conversation he would've been so lost. They were talking about the Louies. Johnny ate. Listening. Following the winding paths of their conversations. Watching them jump from one topic to another.

"Oh," Mrs. LaRusso said after they'd been sitting a while, no longer eating just talking. She turned to Johnny and clapped her hands. "I'm so glad you came today. I wanted to send some of these with Daniel to give you. But now you can have them fresher." She got up picking up

the leftover risotto and putting it on the counter and grabbing a different container that she brought back and set out. "I made cannoli today. Thought you'd like to try some."

"Thank you Mrs. LaRusso," Johnny said taking one. It looked like a wrapped pastry filled with something white that looked like cream and chocolate chips. He had no clue how to eat it without making a mess.

She smiled at him. Warm. Motherly. She patted his hand gently and asked about progress on the senior trip. Daniel updated her on the information, helping himself to a cannoli. She got up to package the rest of them up while she listened.

Johnny bit into his and as he feared it made a mess. It was sweet, but white mascarpone and cream, what Mrs. LaRusso had said the filling was made out of, covered his fingers. Definitely a faux pas if he was anywhere else. There was probably a reason he hadn't had a cannoli at any fancy diner party.

He wasn't at a fancy dinner party though. He was at the LaRusso's. He licked his fingers clean. He tried again.

It was hard to break habits. To not sit up straight but relax, to not care that he was making a mess. To not panic and look for a napkin and expect to be berated for making a mess. It was a little embarrassing but it was fine.

It was delicious though. She'd said something about ricotta being a normal ingredient.

He felt eyes boring into him. He glanced over. Daniel was staring at him with that dark look in his eyes. The way he had at the last time he'd been there. A look he occasionally caught but didn't understand. He was all stiff, staring. Completely focused and not talking. Thinking probably. But Johnny didn't know what. Mrs. LaRusso was talking while she was in the kitchen. Excited for their senior trip. Talking about her own favorite field trips from when she'd been in school.

The last time Johnny had stared back until his mother had joked that he was flirting. He didn't know what to do this time. Was there a proper way to eat them that he didn't know? Was it like leaving your chopsticks sticking up in your food? Couldn't be. Most cultures frowned on wasting food. A mistake he didn't know? Maybe he should look for a book on Italian customs, but would they be Italian or Italian American? Or New Jersey specific?

They were impossible to eat without making a mess, he looked back at his hands, licked them clean again, determined that there had to be a better way and he'd figure it out eventually. Maybe he'd find a shop that sold them, a bakery and watch other people eat them. That sounded like something only a creep would do though. Someone had to know. He'd missed seeing how Daniel handled it. Daniel had his bottom lip between his teeth again. The way he had when Johnny was reading. The way he just did sometimes.

There was something he'd promised himself that he'd forgotten. He heard the sound of water and turned. He'd promised to offer to help with the dishes. He should've offered earlier. Would it be too weird to get up now and ask, to take over? Probably. There was a perfect time to take over and when someone had already started didn't seem the right time.

Daniel was still staring.

"Do I have something on my face?" Johnny asked, quietly.

"No," Daniel said. It was so little. Usually, he said so much more. He was struggling with something.

Johnny sat quietly. There were a bunch of dinner party topic starters he'd been trained to learn. He never ever thought he'd need to use one around Daniel. Daniel always just talked. He tried to filter through them for any that were applicable. That didn't have to do with local sports teams, gambling, stocks, business, or any of the ridiculous things he'd been asked to learn about.

Was it him? He couldn't figure out what he'd done. Maybe a neutral topic.

"Kata was nice," Johnny said looking at Daniel. "Harder than I thought it'd be."

It was almost like Daniel wasn't there. Physically yes, but like he'd mentally packed his bags and left somewhere else. It took a while for what Johnny said to register. For the wheels to turn.

"Yeah."

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Johnny glanced at the clock. He should probably get home. He excused himself from the table, and washed his hands, and then walked to the kitchen to thank Mrs. LaRusso. She smiled warmly at him and told him to come back any time.

He headed towards the door, he turned to see Daniel followed him to the door. He was holding a box of cannoli that he pressed into Johnny's hands as Johnny stepped out of the apartment.

Johnny worried the edges of the box turning back, Daniel leaned easily against his door. Looked like he'd recovered from whatever it was.

"Before finals, or semi-finals we usually meet up and study...if you want to join. We've got a semi-final coming up, so we're spending part of next week at Tommy's after school."

Daniel smiled. "I'd like that."

"Thank you," he said again. "Good night Daniel."

"Good night Johnny," Daniel said warmly.

Whatever it was seemed to have passed. Daniel didn't seem upset with him, which was a relief.

Johnny pulled away from the warmth of the LaRusso's apartment and out of the light that flooded the hall. He headed down the stairs to his car. He unlocked it and set the cannoli gently next to the bonsai. He'd share some with his mom. She'd be delighted.

He breathed deeply. It'd gone well for the most part. He'd been so nervous and it'd been fine. He felt good. He turned on his music. His fingers tapped on the steering wheel to the beat, pulling away from the Seven Seas apartment complex.

Study Dates

Daniel was going to go fishing again. He'd let the line go too slack. He had to reel back in.

He couldn't sit still.

He could be patient, or he thought he could, but he needed to test that foundation again and he'd had a spark of inspiration based on what Johnny had said after dinner.

Something simple to spend more time together.

A *classic*.

When Johnny was taking a break from kata practice, he sat down next to Daniel on the wooden platform just like Daniel knew he would.

A perfectly executed trap.

Johnny leaned over to see what he was working on.

Math.

"You understood the new formulas?" Johnny asked.

"I do," Daniel said with a warm smile. "Almost done."

Johnny looked thoughtful. "How?"

Daniel tried to keep his grin down.

Caught.

He flipped to a new page in his notebooks and went to work showing Johnny, speaking slow and softly, explaining how to solve for it. Working through a few of the problems.

Johnny sat close, head bent, focused on the page.

Now for the next step.

"Did you bring your homework?" Daniel asked, looking up.

They were so close.

"Yeah, it's in the Avanti."

"Bring it, we'll work on it together," Daniel said with a smile.

Johnny was up and gone.

Daniel waited, letting his grin spread.

He'd missed one of the most obvious plays. He'd been trying all the wrong approaches. In class Johnny paid attention. He took copious amounts of notes. In English, he saw things differently than Daniel. And the teachers *always* liked what Johnny said, the metaphors he saw deep in the writing, between the lines.

But with math, there was a right answer. Always. And Johnny got it, most of the time. But he didn't raise his hand as fast as Daniel did. And Daniel liked being faster. Liked rubbing it in his face. *Used to.* Now he could use it to his advantage.

He tapped his pencil against the paper.

Johnny came back with his school bag. He sat down again beside Daniel, taking out his book, notebook, and pencils.

Daniel leaned over, watching him work, practicing what Daniel had just taught him.

He pressed close.

He'd have to be careful.

He'd have to focus.

He couldn't get distracted. He was going to try and not startle Johnny. But he wanted to check on something else. If he was healing.

He'd have to telegraph his move. So he wouldn't scare him. He watched Johnny work.

There.

Now.

He ran his hand up Johnny's back up to his shoulder.

He was blushing, ears were delightfully red, but he wasn't flinching. He hooked his arm over Johnny's shoulder and pointed. Leaning close,

speaking softly in his ear. "Gotta start with the parenthesis."

Johnny tried again. Erasing and going back to work. He didn't shy away. Daniel wanted to get up and celebrate. *He was healing.* He could handle someone touching his shoulders again. An arm around the back of his neck. He wondered if Johnny even noticed how monumental that was. He wanted to tell Mr. Miyagi. But he also wanted to savor it.

Daniel watched Johnny work. Gently guiding him when he messed up with soft whispers in his ear. His shoulders were stiff, but after a while of work, the tension began to leave. He didn't need too much help. And it was hard to not be distracted. He could bite Johnny's ear if he wanted, or his neck.

It was tempting. Very tempting.

Johnny finished his last problem, the last of his homework and let out a satisfied sigh as he shut the book and he leaned back, bumping into Daniel's chest like he'd forgotten Daniel was there.

Daniel didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

It was amusing with how Johnny stiffened suddenly turning, the blush that had hidden away, scared off by math problems flooding back. Clearly wasn't used to it anymore. Not having the ex-cobras or anyone hang around so close. It was almost gratifying. Daniel almost believed it was because of him. He could dream.

"Thanks," Johnny said after a moment.

He looked thoughtful, which was cruel. So damn close Daniel could kiss him, but he was thinking about something else. Because of course, he was.

"Did reading aloud help? With *Pride and Prejudice?"*

Oh.

Oh, hell yes.

Daniel pulled away slowly, letting his hand run along Johnny's back. No sudden movements. He turned and opened his bag.

"A trade?" he asked, amused.

He could work with this. He grabbed his book. He pressed it into

Johnny's hands and he laid down.

He'd take advantage of this. A new perspective.

Johnny was opening the book. Not paying attention as Daniel put his head in Johnny's lap.

This was how old work should be read. By a hot guy who let you lay your head on them. Daniel would pass English with flying colors.

Johnny read and Daniel listened. It was soothing. Calming. Johnny read well. Not as choppy as their classmates. Not as monotone.

Johnny stopped reading and lifted the book looking down at Daniel.

"Hmm?" Daniel asked.

"Are you falling asleep?"

He was. He was too comfortable. He yawned and stretched.

"Do you remember what's happening?" Johnny asked.

Oh, he was serious.

Teacher Mr. Lawrence.

Daniel's lips quirked into a grin at the thought.

"Darcy's asked Elizabeth to dance and she turned him down, again," Daniel said. He *was* paying attention. He really was. He pushed himself up. "Uh and there's now a Miss Darcy."

"Darcy's little sister," Johnny said.

"Right." He stretched again. "Where's the romantic bit? Elizabeth hates everyone but her Dad and her sister."

"Ah, we're not there yet," Johnny said.

"Not there *yet*? Have you finished it?"

"I have," Johnny said, moving the book to one hand, letting his finger be the bookmark.

"How fast do you read?"

"Not fast. I just...read before bed."

"Instead of sleeping," Daniel said with a frown. "You have to sleep Johnny."

"Only *sometimes*. I do sleep."

There was hesitation. He was trying to bat away the concern. To make it seem like it wasn't anything. But if Daniel looked close he could see how tired he was. He leaned close.

"You gotta sleep."

"I'll try," Johnny said.

Daniel sighed, shifting to lean against him. "Okay."

It was as good as he could get right now. He couldn't just go into the mansion and pull Johnny out of it.

His mother got that he liked Johnny but he had nowhere to put him. And Johnny wouldn't want to leave his mother behind. He couldn't ask him to do that.

They sat for a bit with Johnny reading.

They put away their homework when Mr. Miyagi came back, Johnny returning the bookmark and they practiced kata until it was time to go home.

It became a thing.

They'd do homework together, sitting close. Daniel's arm slung very carefully around Johnny's shoulder, helping him with homework and then Daniel would find a comfortable position to listen to Johnny read.

His newest go-to was laying down on the boards with his legs over Johnny's in his lap. A jacket pillowed under his head.

It was a good excuse, his knee.

He had a better view, watching Johnny read to him, not blocked by the book. Then they'd do kata with Mr. Miyagi.

Daniel was pretty pleased. The weeks passed fairly quickly until it was time for the group study days.

Those were at Tommy's house. And Daniel followed Johnny there,

with all his notes and all his books, prepared.

Tommy's house was modest in comparison to the mansions Jimmy and Johnny lived in. But it was about the same size as Bobby's.

He parked and gathered up his heavy backpack. Johnny had his bag slung over his shoulder, bonsai under one arm.

Johnny held the door open for him and led Daniel through the halls to a library.

"Oh thank god," Tommy said. "Bobby and I keep getting different answers. Daniel, I need your help."

Ah, that was nice.

He set his things down in a corner and walked over, watching Johnny out of the corner of his eye while he set the bonsai carefully on a table, notebook in his hand, setting his bag down and sitting next to Jimmy.

Daniel sat between them going over the math problem. He watched them try again. He leaned over, correcting them.

"Are we seriously starting with math?" Dutch complained.

"Daniel has an A in math," Tommy said.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah," Tommy said. "So yes, we're going to take advantage of the situation and get help. Because I for one would like to tack a nice grade on the fridge for the midterms."

"Your aunt offered you something nice didn't she?" Dutch asked amused.

"Hmmm maybe. But hey, Bobby gets money for every A *he* gets."

Bobby grinned. "I do. And if I'm lucky I'll be visiting UCLA and taking some girls out to dinner with my good grade money."

"Oh god," Jimmy groaned. "Daniel, please, teach us. Get him off-topic. I can't listen about these girls anymore."

"Yeah I'm going to hurl," Dutch complained. "*Anything* else would be better. Mr. LaRusso, math time."

Daniel grinned.

He could definitely get used to this.

He worked slow.

Checking over their work, answering questions, moving through what they'd learned so far that semester. Watching them do the practice questions the teacher had given them as a study guide.

"I gotta take a break, my brains gonna leak out of my ears," Jimmy said leaning back after they'd finished half. "You mind if we switch gears? Maybe grab a snack? Tommy, what've you got in the fridge?"

"I *know* how this works," Tommy said looking at Jimmy. "I list everything I remember. You hmm you hah, you decided you'd rather see for yourself. In case I forgot something. Then you just stare in the fridge for five minutes and then grab string cheese. I'm going to save my breath. Just go look for yourself and grab your string cheese."

Jimmy laughed, holding up his hands. "Okay okay, I'll bring back snacks."

Tommy nodded and turned back to Daniel. "You did all the heavy lifting, so what do you want to study next?"

Daniel thought about it. He felt like English was covered, what with Johnny reading to him and discussing the book afterward.

"Let's do history," Daniel said a bit of thought.

Jimmy returned with a tray of snacks.

"Tommy your aunt was saying something about this weekend?"

Tommy stood. "Right, uh, I'll...be back."

Jimmy set the tray down and took string cheese and sat back down. "So what we choose?"

"History," Dutch said, dropping the textbook heavily on the desk. "You're up, Mr. I want to be a fancy pants lawyer."

"Aw heck yeah," Jimmy said leaning forward.

"Wait, really?" Daniel asked surprised.

"Had some eye-opening conversations lately. Plus I like this type of stuff," Jimmy said with a smile to Daniel then turned to Johnny. "Don't worry Johnny I'll get you out of jail pro bono."

"Hey," Johnny said.

"What about me?" Dutch said.

"Nah I'm charging you," Jimmy said with a grin.

Dutch threw an eraser at him but Jimmy dodged.

They went to work. Daniel listened to Jimmy quiz them on what was expected on their history test. Tommy came back after a while a warm smile on his face.

Before he knew it the night was over.

When he was heading towards the door Tommy tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey, so this weekend we're going to the beach house. We'll do some studying, but my aunt also has some work to do. I was wondering if you'd be okay with helping out?"

Daniel stared. "Uh, what is it? I might not be useful."

"It's a photoshoot. My aunt works for a magazine and has to take some photos for the magazine."

"Listen, I'm not really the most photogenic-"

"Oh, don't worry uh not you. Johnny agreed. Or kind of has agreed," Tommy said. "But I need some help and all the other guys are busy. They won't arrive till lunch. There's all this stuff that has to be carried around and I guess my aunt put me in charge of that. But there's photo assisting stuff. Think you can be there at 7 am? Like I'll make sure we cover your ticket to New York City."

Daniel stared at him in shock. "Seriously?"

"Yeah I mean we have a fund for kids who don't live in the Hills for their tickets and everything to be cheaper. I might actually have to dip into that for Johnny too...depending on Sid," Tommy said. "It's one of the things we've been raising since- oh wow, it's been a while. Parents donate like every year. We use it for prom and the senior trip. Part of my platform was that we wouldn't leave anyone behind for the trip."

"Okay, yeah. I'll be there. 7 am? Where?"

Tommy grabbed a piece of paper and quickly wrote a phone number and address. "Saturday, 7 am. We'll be on the beach. And then afternoon we'll eat lunch and then a final push to study before next week's mid-terms. And then before you know it we'll be in New York."

Daniel took the paper. He said goodbye to the guys and went home.

A magazine photo shoot with Johnny.

Weird.

But it also made sense.

He kept thinking he looked like he belonged in a calendar or something. But Johnny could also belong in a magazine.

He wondered what kind of photoshoot it'd be. It preoccupied his mind most of the rest of the week.

His mind kept going off the deep end.

He wondered what he'd be doing. Holding lights? Running changes of clothes?

He was dying to know by the time Saturday rolled around. He almost hadn't been able to enjoy their study dates. *Almost.*

It was too early.

His mother handed him a thermos of coffee and he drove out, following the directions Tommy had given him to a private beach.

There was a gate.

He remembered what Johnny had done at the one by the lake. He leaned over and pushed the button.

"Hello?" The voice was too crackly to make out who it was.

"Hi, it's Daniel. I'm supposed to be helping?"

The gates slid open and he drove through.

The house was stunning. Lots of big windows and a beautiful deck and view of the beach. He parked his car and looked around. He spotted

the Avanti but no Johnny.

Tommy had said the beach. And sure enough, he could see tables and umbrellas set out, and a tent. He headed down the hill towards it, walking through the sand.

"Hey, uh, I'm here?" Daniel said when he spotted Tommy holding a big bag standing on the beach. He'd been hidden by the tent.

"Ah perfect," Tommy said.

He motioned for Daniel to follow him. They walked through the sand to a rocky outcropping. Johnny was leaning against it in jeans and what barely constituted a white tank top.

Daniel swallowed hard. *Oh.*

There was a middle-aged woman taking photos.

"So what is this for?" Daniel whispered.

Johnny was focused. Charming smiles. Listening to her speak, following her directions. Subtle movements to change the pose.

"They're preparing for the summer issue. My aunt's been asking him to do photoshoots since we met. It's the blue eyes...it's because-"

"He's pretty," Daniel finished for him.

"Yeah," Tommy said adjusting the bag over his shoulder.

"They apparently do well. It's a bit of modeling. Johnny gets a little bit of his own money. Not from Sid or anyone else. I'll have to show you the other photos. The first time my aunt asked him to do it, I mean those were cute. But when he..." Tommy waved at Johnny. "Grew up, I guess, apparently the readers, of this teen magazine department wanted more like this. I think they use him as like a fake boyfriend in a girls magazine? Where they use his photos and some writer answers questions girls have. Johnny said he doesn't want to know. He's a bit embarrassed by it. Apparently, when he went from a little twig to well this, a lot of guys read it too. Sent in a bunch of questions on how. They had to call my aunt, and my aunt had to ask me. I had to get Johnny's workout regimen out of him. The one Kreese gave him. It was a lot. Like I couldn't have done it. It was like all he did outside of school and classes that entire first year he started."

Daniel kept trying to focus on Tommy. But his eyes kept going back to Johnny. Tommy's aunt was talking to him and he was nodding and he was taking off the white tank and *damn* those muscles. He was tensing, flexing. He knew because he'd seen what Johnny looked like shirtless, resting, sick. A few more photos then Johnny was walking towards them across the sand.

"What's next?" Tommy called to his aunt.

"Clothing change," she said.

Tommy nodded and the three of them headed towards the tent. Tommy shoved a bottle into Daniel's hands. There was a little divider in the tent and Jimmy threw something white over the divider as Johnny ducked behind it.

"Uh yeah, so you're up," Tommy said patting Daniel on the shoulder. "Skip the face. They don't like that, but the rest- he's gotta glisten."

Glisten? What the hell?

Tommy was gone and Daniel was alone with Johnny. He looked down at the bottle Tommy had given him.

Oil.

Baby oil.

Wait.

Wait.

Skip the face.

What was he...?

Johnny came out wearing white pants. They almost looked like the bottom of a gi.

"Tommy roped you into this?" Johnny asked quietly.

"Yeah," Daniel said. He thought about laughing but it'd be misunderstood. Oh. Maybe... "So you never mentioned you model."

Johnny looked uncomfortable. "Not a lot."

"For an advice column?" Daniel asked with a laugh. "Clearly I read the

wrong magazines."

Johnny flushed red.

Daniel grinned stepping forward.

"Anything I should know? Tommy high-tailed it out of here pretty fast. You fight the last person who tried to grease you up?"

"No, I mean I can do it myself. Most of it," Johnny said reaching for the bottle.

"Atatatata," Daniel said holding the bottle out of the way. "I was given a job. I'm going to do it."

Bless Tommy. Hell if Daniel could vote for him he would. They hadn't gone to the same school. But if he went back in time, he'd send a little vote in the mail. Maybe he'd vote for him for prom king.

He opened the bottle and poured the oil onto his hands.

"This going to fry you?" he asked after a moment.

He wanted to start on Johnny's torso. Focus on the muscles there. But instead, he worked his hands up Johnny's arm. Restraint. He was trying.

"I can't stand around too long with it, yeah. I'll fry," Johnny said. "Red as a lobster."

Daniel laughed shaking his head. "Poor guy."

"Some of us don't tan easily."

"Blessed Italian genes," Daniel said with a grin, moving his way up to Johnny's biceps.

Johnny flexed and Daniel felt his mouth go dry. He knew he was blushing. But he was going to do this. And he was going to enjoy every damn second of it. He moved his way to Johnny's shoulder, moving slow, massaging the oil in.

Johnny's whole arm was shiny. Glistened.

Tommy hadn't given him a deadline. Hadn't told him to hurry. So he wasn't going to. He'd drag his fingers across every inch of skin he'd been given to touch.

He was out of oil. He picked up the bottle, poured more into his hands.

He picked up where he left off, moving down from the deltoid to Johnny's pec.

Johnny shivered. He was turning redder.

"It's not cold is it?" Daniel asked working his way down.

Daniel was trying to keep a neutral face, trying to remain calm. He'd seen kids in speech class turn bright red, the way their shoulders and necks reddened. It was like someone had spilled paint on Johnny. His chest was warm underneath Daniel's fingers, red but only to a point.

Johnny was practicing his breathing. Good for him. Learning. Trying not to, what? Go into fight or flight mode?

Now, the question was could he keep it up? If Daniel kept going, down.

He was tense. Flexing.

Daniel worked his way down Johnny's abdomen taking his time on Johnny's abs. Running oil over each one, enjoying the sensation. Looking at them up close.

Maybe he'd get Tommy something nice. Maybe, just maybe he'd bring him back a slice of the New York cheesecake from his favorite shop. *After* dragging Johnny there.

His fingers brushed Johnny's waistband. He worked his way to his other side, to go up and up.

Johnny was covered in goosebumps.

"You okay?" Daniel asked after a moment, stepping back and looking up.

Johnny was so red.

He poured more oil into his hands. He was probably was really fighting off the urge to either fight or bolt. Embarrassed.

"You're too quiet," Johnny said softly.

"Huh?" Daniel asked.

"Can you talk about something, anything?" It was a plead.

The poor guy looked so damn uncomfortable.

Daniel sighed, he'd been too focused. He hadn't started drooling right? He brushed his forearm against his lips, no, he was good.

"Okay, yeah. You might not like it...all I can think about right now are muscles," Daniel admitted uneasily.

"It's fine, just talk."

Daniel blinked.

No one ever asked him to *just talk*.

So he did. About muscles. About how he hadn't seen muscles like this up close before. No one in his family really worked out. They were strong. Some of them. But not like this. None of them had abs. He talked about the gym he passed back in Newark. About looking in the windows and sometimes seeing this guy, some big muscle dude doing push-ups and girls sitting on his back giggling. And how it kind of looked like fun. But he wasn't strong enough to do that. He told Johnny about Louie dropping a cat on his back while attempting it and how he'd gotten all scratched up.

He was back up to Johnny's other pec.

He looked about as he moved on to Johnny's shoulder and back down his arm. He saw a stool and pulled it over with his foot.

"Sit," he told Johnny and Johnny did.

Daniel couldn't believe he'd just do as he asked. No fight or protest.

He complained that Louie should've gotten a dog, or hell just a block of cheese from the fridge. *Anything* would've been better than a cat.

He was dying to know though.

"Think you could do it?"

"The push-up thing?" Johnny asked.

Daniel's hands were working on his shoulders. Damn Johnny was tense. All knots. He'd always wondered what knots really felt like, but this, this was it. He dug his fingers into Johnny's shoulders, wondering

if he could take care of one of them or try to while he was there.

"Yeah," Daniel said.

"May-*ah*-maybe."

That was interesting.

Johnny's head was bowed, hiding. But he was still red. His ears, a tell-tale sign. *Maybe*.

Who did he think he could lift? Daniel wanted to try it. See if Johnny could do push-ups while Daniel sat on his back.

He chewed on his lower lip.

"Daniel?"

Right. Focus. Damn, he noticed too quickly.

Daniel cleared his throat. "What did you do to yourself? You're practically all knots."

"I... It's not important right now."

"But-"

"Daniel," Johnny looked up at him, head tilting back. The blush had receded a bit. Just a light bit on his cheeks. "Tommy's aunt has a deadline. Ignore the knots."

"How tight you are?" Daniel asked amused. That blush came back and Daniel loved it. "Okay, okay. But this isn't over mister. This is ridiculous. You've got to be one of the tensest teens in California."

"It's midterms."

"Says the guy doing kata and reading *Pride and Prejudice* to me. You look calm Johnny but your back tells a different tale," Daniel said pressing his fingers into Johnny's skin as he dragged his hands down his back.

"You're not-ah, worried about midterms?"

Daniel grinned. "With a bunch of ex-cobras offering a study group? Nah. I think I'll pass with flying colors. Ma will be so proud. The fridge will be full of my tests," Daniel said. He stepped back, then

walked around Johnny taking in his work. He looked magazine ready. But maybe not teen magazine ready. Pin-up calendar ready.

"I think you're good to go, Mr. Pretty boy."

Johnny sighed, then turned to one of the boxes. Daniel wiped excess baby oil off his fingers with a towel.

Johnny held a black band. A familiar-looking one. He held it with hesitation.

"Come here," Daniel said. He took it from Johnny and pushed himself up on tiptoe, tying it around his forehead. He moved the blonde hair over it. "There. They're doing the karate thing, huh?"

"Yeah. Because they had the workout regimen. It's been a part of it ever since," Johnny said softly.

"Well hey, you still do it, it's just a little different now," Daniel said smiling at him, lowering gently back down to his heels.

"Right," Johnny said, a soft smile. "Thanks."

No, thank you. ***Anytime****.*

"Glad to be of help."

Johnny walked out of the tent to continue his photoshoot. Daniel grabbed the bottle and after calming his heart, waiting for his own blush to fade, knowing it'd be much more obvious in the sun than in the shade, he headed back out.

Johnny was leaning against some rocks, a new pose, moving slowly, adjusting when Tommy's aunt told him to.

"Hey, he's glistening," Tommy said smiling at him.

He took the bottle from Daniel and put it back in his bag.

Daniel watched because there wasn't anything else he could do.

Nothing else he wanted to do.

He wanted copies. Of the magazine. Of the photos.

But asking would give himself away.

After a while, Johnny was walking back and Tommy was sprinting out towards the tent again.

"Hey, you, Daniel right?" Tommy's aunt called.

"Uh, yes ma'am," Daniel said.

"There's a bucket, sitting on the table. Grab it and fill it with water, the ocean is fine. Don't get any sand or seaweed in it. No fish or anything and just wait."

"Yes ma'am," Daniel said. He found the bucket on the table.

Johnny had changed again, jeans. No shirt again.

Daniel really wanted this magazine.

He took off his shoes and headed out to the tide to fill the bucket and stand waiting for whatever he'd be asked to do.

Johnny talked to Tommy's aunt a bit.

Johnny was barefoot and walked out into the water.

"Daniel," she called after a couple of shots. "Get his hair wet."

Did he just throw the bucket full of water at him? He wasn't tall enough to stand over him and dump it. Johnny was too damn tall.

Johnny walked closer to the shallows, he bent down.

"Keep your eyes closed, this is saltwater," Daniel said lifting the bucket.

He tried to pour it gently, the fluffy locks from earlier were doused and water streamed down his face and neck, down his chest.

"Good," she called and Daniel stopped pouring and Johnny blinked his eyes open and stepped back into the waves.

No wonder he'd been good at that first balance practice.

"Towel," she called, still taking photos.

Tommy handed a towel to Daniel.

"Dry off his face," she said stepping back.

Daniel darted into the waves. Hopping as he went.

He dried off Johnny's face and then stepped back again. Back on the sand. He ran a few more errands. All Johnny-related. Mostly she had him fix his hair. A lot. Helped him dry off. Doused him in more strategic water.

Then after a while, she was putting her camera in her bag.

"Okay, we're good. Johnny, good job, hit the showers. Tommy, Daniel good work. Enjoy the study group. I'm going to go get these developed and get them to press," she said slinging the bag over her shoulder.

"You need help taking this all down?" Daniel asked Tommy as Johnny took off in a jog towards the house.

"He's going to wash off the oil. Before he burns," Tommy explained. "And yeah, if you don't mind."

The least I can do.

"Yeah not a problem," Daniel said.

He helped take down tables and carry them back to the house. Helped take down the tent. Gathered up odds and ends.

Daniel grabbed his shoes and socks and carried them back up to the beach house.

He washed his hands and went to the car to get his school work.

"How does pulled pork sandwiches sound?" Tommy asked pulling open the fridge and looking in.

"Uh sure."

"Good, that's what my aunt made or bought, not sure which," he said amused pulling out a dish and setting out buns and dumping some shredded meat into a pan.

The doors opened and the guys filled in with their school books, taking up the seats around Daniel, greeting him warmly.

Bobby had desserts, Jimmy had drinks and it was a full meal and it was full of warmth and friendship and Daniel realized suddenly that he hadn't noticed how much he *liked* them. How nice it was to see them They were silly, full of jokes, but hard-working and they

welcomed him, looked out for him, made sure he was included. Talked to him. And it didn't seem to be out of pity. It wasn't because he was friends with Johnny. But they seemed genuinely happy to see him.

He heard familiar footsteps and turned his head.

Johnny had changed into shorts and a band t-shirt. His hair was wet. He no longer smelled of baby oil or the beach.

He sunk down in the seat next to Daniel and it was nice.

To be included.

To be a part of something.

To be welcomed.

A Step into the Crowd

Being at school at 5 am was unpleasant.

It was sleepy. Everyone was quiet. Still waking up. Dragging their bags to the bus.

Tommy had handed him a clipboard and stood him near one of the entrances to direct people and check them off a list.

Most people had their parents drop them off.

The Mills dropped off Ali, wishing him a good trip and telling her to be good. She smiled at him, dragging her suitcase past him to the bus and he checked her name off the list.

The guys had all arrived early because Tommy had asked them to. The Browns had dropped Bobby off and he was helping the teachers grab stuff. Dutch had picked up Jimmy and was passing out coffee to teachers and the driver. The student council was working, going over their lists, double-checking everything. Tommy stood next to one of the teachers passing out itineraries and lists of numbers for the students.

Mrs. LaRusso dropped of Daniel, her head popping out of the car to grin at Johnny and wish him a good trip.

Daniel looked half asleep, yawning and squinting as he looked around.

His hair was messy.

Too cute.

"Head to the bus, it's over there," Johnny said softly gently placing his hands on Daniel's shoulders and turning him in the direction of Tommy and Dutch who were helping kids put their stuff under the bus.

He watched Daniel sleepily trudge over, watching to make sure he didn't fall over and just fall asleep on the parking lot. He made it, handing off his bag to Dutch and then Dutch turning him around and directing him to Tommy.

He was okay.

He went back to his task.

When it was time to go he jogged back to the bus, everyone was checked off. He compared notes with Tommy and the teacher before boarding the bus.

The guys were all sitting in the same area towards the front so Tommy could be with them but also the council. Daniel was asleep in the middle of the group, red hood up and head leaning against the window. No one had sat next to him.

Bobby tapped the seat for him.

They'd kept it free for him.

He sat down next to Daniel. He had a book bag on his lap. Daniel shifted, moving and resting his head on Johnny's shoulder.

Tommy sat down heavily in the seat in front of them with a sigh. Dutch started softly chatting with him. Heads low and together like they were comparing notes.

The teacher boarded and walked the aisle going over the list one more time.

"Alright, next stop LAX," the teacher said, turning to speak to the driver and then taking a seat behind the driver.

Johnny watched the scenery pass. The bus was so quiet. Quieter than any other field trip Johnny had been on.

He was excited.

He was trying to keep calm.

But without the bonsai, he felt a little untethered. It was probably a good challenge, to be without it somewhere new and let Mr. Miyagi babysit it.

He'd never flown anywhere.

He'd only been in LAX to stand with the staff and the driver, to wish his mother a safe trip as Sid whisked her away somewhere or other.

He hadn't ever really liked it.

Being alone in the vast mansion.

But it was better than having Sid there.

But it was still... quiet. Too quiet. Too echo-y.

But *he* got to go this time.

In a plane.

He was excited to be on the other side.

Going with his friends.

With Daniel.

To see New York.

He knew some of their class was disappointed that they weren't going to someplace *fancier*.

The Mills had come over to talk to Sid at the country club, and they'd brought Ali. They complained they weren't going to Paris, or Venice, or somewhere with more art and culture than New York City.

Ali had said that it was better. Less expensive, and started listing off the world-class museums and the culture that could be found.

They frowned, but let it go.

Tommy had given him an itinerary. But he hadn't looked at it yet. He'd wait until they were on the flight.

It was a five and a half hour flight. He had plenty of time.

He wondered if he should pick up souvenirs. Something for his mom, something for Mr. Miyagi. The kids had asked him to bring something back.

He didn't know what a good souvenir was.

He'd have to ask Daniel.

But not now, he was still asleep. Hugging his arm and with his head on Johnny's shoulder. A warm weight.

Tommy turned in his seat, pushing himself up and looking over.

"Hey," he whispered, eyes taking in Daniel, a grin on his face. "We've

got to corral everyone when we get there. I'm going with the prez and one of the teachers to get the tickets. We gotta stay as a group. So I need you guys to like keep everyone together, don't let anyone wander off. Okay?"

Johnny nodded.

"We get anything for all this work?" Jimmy asked leaning over the back of the seat behind them. "We're *working*."

"I thought you all were helping because you loved me," Tommy said with a sigh, dramatically holding his chest, "My poor heart. You're breaking it. Yeah, you get a fancy dinner IOU from the council and the teachers, now shut up and sit down."

"Nice," Jimmy said sinking back down.

The bus idled at LAX as the students got off, sleepy and zombie-like.

Most of them had fallen asleep again on the ride over.

Dutch was helping them grab their bags, as Tommy darted in with the teacher and council to get organized.

Johnny roused Daniel who looked up at him sleepily.

"We're at LAX, time to get our stuff," Johnny said.

Daniel yawned and nodded. He followed Johnny close rubbing his eyes.

They gathered up their bags and Johnny waited for the signal to start herding kids inside. Waited till everyone had their stuff.

Ali stood next to him too. He thought that was weird. She kept staring at him. Was watching. He didn't like it. She should've been with her friends. Should've been asking the teacher if she could get coffee at one of the stands and wandered off with her friends to get coffee and return. Some fancy drink with a ton of sugar and cream. But she was standing close and not moving. Like she was using him as a guide or was nervous.

She'd been to LAX before. She'd spent a couple of spring breaks overseas. She didn't need to worry about getting lost. This was old hat for her. Unless she was scared about something. Which didn't make sense. She wasn't scared of anything. Not that Johnny knew. Daniel's

head bumped into his arm.

"Don't fall asleep here," Johnny said gently.

Could Daniel fall asleep standing up? He hoped not. But his eyes were open. He was staring at Ali. Ali was staring at him.

Oh. Strange.

Not the time to think about that.

He focused on everything else. Which was helping everyone else, keeping them focused. Moving in the right direction. Not letting anyone break off from the group. It meant when it was time to go, being handed a stack of tickets and passing them out as everyone headed through. Checking names and passing them out.

Which meant having to pry Daniel from his side.

Which failed.

The first two attempts.

His soft, "Daniel, go on through." was met with a sleepy response of "I'll wait."

The third time, when most of the group was gone Johnny stuck the ticket in Daniel's hand and put his hands on his shoulders, steering him towards the gate and through.

At their gate, he was given a group of ten to keep an eye on. Ten kids plus Daniel who'd curled up in one of the seats. Some wanted to get drinks. He made them leave in groups. Reminded them to come back. Kept an eye out.

He was relieved when they boarded. Looking at his ticket. Looking at the seats. Bobby had the window seat and he sunk down gratefully next to him. Daniel sat next to him. He double-checked Daniel's ticket.

That was where he was supposed to be.

Tommy who sat in front of him with Dutch and Jimmy grinned back at him.

On purpose.

He should have known.

He was surprised though when Ali sat behind him. With two of her friends, Susan and Barbara.

Daniel looked like he was finally starting to wake up. Blinking around, taking in everything, fiddling with the controls above them.

"Where'd you leave the bonsai?" Daniel asked.

"With Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said.

"Have you ever flown before?"

"No."

Daniel quieted when the flight attendants came out to explain the safety features and pre-flight safety briefing.

Johnny watched, following along as the plane drove along the tarmac. When it left the ground he gripped the hand rests tight. It was like a roller coaster with the pressure of being pressed into the seat as they rose into the sky.

There were some bumps and he remembered that they were in fact held up by nothing. There wasn't a track underneath them.

"Johnny," Bobby whispered leaning over.

"Hmm?" was all Johnny could manage.

"You tryin' to crush Daniel's hand?"

Johnny looked down. Under his hand was Daniel's. He quickly let go.

"I'm so sorry," Johnny said. "Is your hand okay?"

Daniel looked more awake. He turned to him and smiled.

"It's your first flight."

He lifted his hand and stretched his fingers. "I honestly was starting to wonder, but your grip hasn't really diminished despite not practicing as frequently as you used to."

Oh god, he must've hurt Daniel's hand. He didn't know what to do. He turned to Bobby who just looked amused. He couldn't ask. He turned back to Daniel. He was panicking. He took a deep breath.

Panic later. Check first.

"Do they have ice or anything on planes?" he asked. "Like should I hail down help?" He held out his hands towards Daniels and Daniel put his hand out. "Does it hurt? Did I break anything? Shit. Daniel, I'm so sorry. Does that hurt?"

He very gently bent Daniel's fingers, one by one. Looking from Daniel's hand to his face, studying for any pain.

Daniel shook his head with each one.

"Johnny, I'm fine," Daniel said gently. "I don't think it'll even bruise. But hey, thanks for checking. Here see?"

Daniel's hand encompassed Johnny's and gave it a squeeze. "See, I'm fine."

Johnny nodded. He heard a snort and soft laughter and looked over. Bobby was laughing.

"Hey!" Johnny said bumping his elbow into him. "You made it seem like-"

"I know," Bobby said. "I didn't expect you to...be so panicked. Just enjoy your first flight man."

Daniel hadn't let go of Johnny's hand. He did that sometimes. He should be used to it. But they were kind of in public. Not alone. All their classmates. Their teachers.

Daniel didn't seem to care. Instead, he just leaned in closer.

"Hey, can we look at the itinerary? Tommy didn't tell me what the finalized version had on it."

Johnny dug around in his bag and pulled out the packet. He held it out to Daniel who put down his tray and leaned over, studying, and flipping through the pages.

"Huh," he said.

"What?" Johnny asked.

"Hold on," Daniel said leaning into the aisle and tapping Tommy on the shoulder. He leaned forward, their heads were bowed and they were talking.

As much as Johnny strained his ears to hear he couldn't over the roar of the engine. It was a long conversation and he leaned back into his seat with a sigh. Daniel still hadn't let go of his hand.

"I know you're going to fight me on this," Bobby whispered. "But I really don't think he holds everyone's hands as much as he holds yours." Bobby laughed a little. "It's almost like he's scared you might bolt."

Johnny thought about it. He *had* run once.

"He might. I did run...remember the lodge?"

Bobby frowned. "Yeah. You have an excuse for *everything* don't you?"

"It keeps me grounded."

"Keeps you from moving forward is what it does."

"He got upset when Ali and I were talking. I don't think he's there yet."

"So what you're just torturing yourself?"

"I'm not."

Bobby made an unimpressed sound.

Johnny looked past him and out of the window.

The flight was slow. He got bored. He read.

Daniel talked to Tommy a lot. And surprisingly, Ali.

Johnny couldn't hear what they were saying.

But he was surprised. Something must've changed.

Daniel let his hand go when they were brought a small lunch. He didn't reach for it again.

Johnny was a little disappointed.

He finished his book on New York.

They landed after 3:30 and Johnny couldn't wait to get up and stretch.

Sitting cramped in a little seat for five and half hours had been unpleasant.

Even if it was between Bobby and Daniel.

He now understood why they'd both put in requests for specific seats and why Tommy had given him the look he had when Johnny had said he didn't care.

His legs were too long for the space and they were all cramped.

He understood why Daniel had gone for the aisle. When no one was coming he'd stretch out his legs into the aisle and then pull them back. Probably for his knee.

It was probably too late for Johnny to change seats for the trip back.

When they landed Daniel was practically bouncing on his feet the whole way off the flight.

He kept turning to talk to Johnny. To tell him about how over 800 languages were spoken in New York, and if you listened you could start to pick them out, how it was the first capital in the USA before D.C., about pizza *again* because Daniel would not let the pizza thing go. Home to the first pizza shop in the states and it's so cheap. Pizza in LA was a crime. He was on a pizza tangent.

When they left the gate and entered the airport he took a deep breath, savoring the air, and just looked so utterly happy.

The teachers took over, led them to baggage claim and Tommy put them in charge of their little groups again.

Johnny watched his ten students while Daniel chattered at his side about New York etiquette, not stopping and gawking, to be prepared for weirdness, that everyone is always moving and going and did Johnny know that there was more coastline in New York than there was in LA? Beaches weren't the same but there was a lot of water.

Johnny grabbed his bag when it came off the carousel and double-checked it was his.

Daniel realized he'd been so busy talking that he'd forgotten to look and had to take off after his in a sort of mad scramble to go get it.

"You okay there?" Johnny asked when Daniel returned to his side.

"Yeah," Daniel said with a sigh dumping his bag at their feet next to Johnny's.

Everyone in their group had gotten their bags and Johnny gave Tommy a thumbs up. They waited for a few more students in other groups to get their bags then headed off to the chartered bus to the hotel.

Daniel spent the time looking out the window pointing things out. Excited like a little kid.

Johnny noticed a lot of their classmates near them were quiet. Had been ever since they started getting off the plane. Ever since Daniel started talking.

He glanced around. They were listening. Looking where Daniel was pointing. Even the girls who Daniel told him multiple times all hated his guts.

Johnny wondered if he should let Daniel know, that he had a wider audience than himself. Then the guys who were yawning nearby.

It left a mixed taste in his mouth. They should've been listening to Daniel all along. Yeah, he talked a lot, but he was full of little facts and interesting tidbits. And this was his home turf. But he liked being the only member in Daniel's audience. Liked the way Daniel would turn to him with a grin, patting Johnny's chest to make sure he was paying attention.

He was. He always was.

As their bus made its way into the city Daniel started pointing out specific buildings. A good place to get lunch, an awful place to avoid, that one had good falafel, that one had good sales and got crowded in the afternoon, that was a good place to get coffee.

The bus was parked and everyone filed into the hotel with their luggage as student council and teachers worked out the keys and checked in.

Johnny took in the high ceilings. It reminded him almost of the country club. The interior design was different, but it had glittering chandeliers.

"Hey."

Johnny glanced at the guys. Dutch was sitting on his suitcase. They weren't looking at him, they were looking at Daniel.

"You happy?" Dutch asked.

Daniel grinned. A big wide smile. He was so fucking happy, how could Dutch not tell?

"I will only be happier when I get my hands on a real slice of New York pizza," Daniel said.

Johnny laughed and Daniel glanced at him. The smile didn't falter. "You laugh now, wait till you have one. "

The teacher came over with their keys and a clipboard.

"Bobby, you're in with Tommy. Here's your key. Johnny here's your and Daniel's key. Dutch and Jimmy, here you go. Go take the elevator to your rooms. The number is on the key. Come back down and we'll meet here before going to our first museum. Got it?"

Johnny held his key, glancing through the crowd at Tommy who grinned at him and winked.

Tommy had worked that out.

He shouldn't be surprised anymore.

Not as Daniel started tugging at him, as the guys started pushing him toward the elevator. Happily chatting around him.

If there was an opportunity they'd take it. They'd put him next to Daniel whenever they could, wherever they could.

Jimmy's arm was around Daniel's shoulders, he made it look easy, was asking him about somewhere they were going, something they were doing.

Daniel was answering, he looked more comfortable. No longer scared to be in a small space with the ex-cobras.

Johnny wondered when that had happened. When he no longer hid behind Johnny. No longer stiffened when they spoke, when they crowded in.

He was glad. His chest felt warm, he didn't like that Daniel was scared of them.

He understood it. But this was better. Daniel among them, like he belonged.

Their rooms were all next to each other and simple.

Two beds.

Johnny was kind of relieved.

Daniel beelined to the bed next to the window and looked out.

He laughed and looked back at Johnny.

"Typical view," he said. "it's of a wall."

Johnny unpacked a little. Cleaned up a little.

Then they went back downstairs, taking a seat on the couch.

Before the guys returned Ali sank down on the other side of Daniel.

Johnny watched her warily. She'd hurt them both. But she made it look so easy to sit down next to them like there wasn't a history there. Like she hadn't taken Johnny's heart and stomped on it like she hadn't hurt Daniel. Like he still wasn't struggling.

Maybe it'd been better for Johnny, for him to have so many months of her ignoring him.

He was able to move on. Even if it was in a weird one-sided infatuation with Daniel that Bobby thought was Johnny torturing himself.

But Johnny was okay.

But Daniel? Daniel was still hung up on that night at the party. Still hurting. Still healing.

He wanted to tell her to go away. He wanted to demand why she was suddenly so friendly.

He wanted to pick Daniel up, move him to the other side of the couch, to shield him from whatever it was that was happening.

Johnny may have apologized, but it didn't mean *he'd* forgiven *her*.

But Daniel didn't look uneasy. His shoulders weren't tense. He was talking easily with her. Small things about art.

Johnny had promised himself, if Daniel moved on he'd be fine. He'd be

okay. But not with Ali. He didn't trust her anymore.

He leaned against the arm of the sofa and put his head in his hand.

He was too tense.

She was getting under his skin again.

He'd been trying so hard not to snap at her.

Every time girls flocked to him, he wanted to storm over to her and ask her to call them off. To just leave him alone, something she was so good at.

He bit the inside of his cheek. He drew blood.

He took in the vase on one of the tables full of flowers.

He would not know what he'd do with himself if somehow Daniel forgave Ali and got back together with her.

He'd have to take that drive. The drive in the Avanti with his emergency fund.

Maybe go out in the desert and just lay in the sand and dirt and stare up at the stars.

Cornflowers. The Bachelor's button. *Hope.* Anemone. *Anticipation.* White roses. It was a wedding bouquet.

He looked around. Curious. Their school group had finished checking in so the loud crowd was gone.

He spotted them.

A wedding party.

A man in a suit looking absolutely delighted, his bride on his arm, coming from one of the banquet rooms.

His heart stung.

He needed air.

They looked so damn happy.

He stood.

He walked out of the front door quickly and quietly.

There was a doorman.

One day, maybe.

One day, but not now.

If he picked a girl it'd be easy. But he hadn't. Or he *had*.

She'd just left him.

It wouldn't have worked out.

It wouldn't have been a good wedding anyway.

Sid would've taken over. He wouldn't have been able to have his friends there in the capacity he wanted them to be.

It was for the best.

But Daniel might, one day. Maybe with her.

Ali changed her mind about things sometimes.

Maybe with some other girl.

Maybe he *was* torturing himself.

He breathed deeply.

New York was so different when you were standing in it.

Not on the bus. Not on a plane. Alone.

He breathed again.

It smelled differently.

It was busy.

It was loud.

The accents were different. There were so many of them.

He could step out.

Off the doorstep of the hotel.

Join in.

Follow people wherever they were going to go.

He wanted to see New York.

And he could.

On his own.

The guys would cover for him.

They'd worry.

But he needed to stretch his legs.

He needed to move.

He needed more distance between Ali. Possibly for the rest of his life.

"Hey, kid."

Johnny looked at the doorman. He was holding out a business card. Johnny took it. It had the name of the hotel on it and the address.

"Welcome to New York."

"Thanks," Johnny said.

Johnny looked at his watch. They weren't supposed to leave for another half hour.

He could go for a quick walk.

He had to.

He had to be moving.

He had to do something.

Anything.

He couldn't continue sitting on the couch with Daniel and Ali talking about art.

He took a deep breath and stepped into the crowd and let it carry him away from the hotel.

Paintings and Pizza

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Talking with Ali was comfortable. Now that they were just friends. Now that she knew and he had someone on his team.

Johnny was quiet, but that was normal. He moved his leg, to press his against Johnny's. To tell him he hadn't forgotten about him. To make sure he was still there.

His leg brushed nothing.

He frowned.

He leaned back.

No shoulder to bump into.

He whirled.

Johnny wasn't sitting next to him on the couch. When had that happened?

He turned back to Ali.

"When did Johnny leave? Where'd he go?"

He tried to keep calm.

It was nothing.

Johnny probably saw one of the guys or was talking to someone else. But he couldn't find him as he looked around the room, as he pushed himself up, hand on the back of the couch, searching past the wedding party and the group for the tall blonde.

"He's probably around somewhere," Ali said.

"We're in New York City. This isn't LA. He doesn't know where anything is. He could..." *Get mugged, kidnapped, stabbed, lost.*

"Hey, just ask the cobras, they're right there," Ali said motioning.

Daniel was up, searching their group.

He wasn't there.

He stopped.

They were friends, but if he told them he'd lost track of Johnny... not even in New York City proper for a full hour and he was gone? They'd never forgive him. *He'd* never forgive himself. They'd resend everything.

He spun on his heels before they could see him and darted to the front door.

He'd ask the doorman.

"Have you seen a tall blonde? Pretty? Blue eyes. A teen guy? All muscle? He was wearing a blue jacket," Daniel asked in a rush.

He was trying so hard not to panic. He'd promised Johnny he'd stay by his side. And then he hadn't noticed. Hadn't seen him leave.

"Yeah, he's been doing laps."

"Laps?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah, he's tall enough I can't miss him," the doorman said. "Look there."

Daniel stood on his tiptoes and looked the way the doorman was pointing. Johnny was walking swiftly through the crowd across the street. He was listening to his Walkman, weaving through the people like it was second nature. Bright blue in a crowd of black suits.

Daniel let out a deep sigh.

Johnny was waiting at the crosswalk, and then when it turned he joined the group working his way across the street back towards the hotel.

Daniel was going to kill him.

What the hell had he been thinking?

Did he know how dangerous that was?

How much trouble they would've gotten into?

He was going to reach out and grab him when he came past and he was going to chew him out. Field trips were all about the buddy system, and did Johnny not realize that he'd left him behind? He wasn't supposed to go anywhere without Daniel.

He breathed.

Who knew why Johnny had left. And he hadn't gone *far*. Not far enough for the doorman to lose track of him.

But how long had he been gone? How long had Daniel not noticed?

Johnny was walking towards them. Blue eyes focused, he glanced at his watch. A quick look and then straight ahead. Then he glanced at the hotel, a quick glance, then he looked startled and stepped out of the crowd, pulling his headphones down.

"Daniel?"

Daniel was still pissed. But he kept his hands down at his side.

"What the hell? You- you could've been- Why did you-"

He couldn't pick one. He had too many questions, was too angry. He'd been so worried. This wasn't LA. Where Johnny seemed to know his way around with ease. Where Johnny didn't need Daniel to get around. But this was New York City. It'd eat him alive if he wasn't careful.

Johnny stepped closer.

"I just needed some air. I just walked around in like a figure eight. Around this block and that one," he said pointing.

"I-"

Johnny waited. Patient. Quiet. Fiddling with the cord to his headphones.

Damnit.

Daniel reached out and grabbed his hand, pulling him back into the hotel.

"It's dangerous, this isn't LA," Daniel said. "What if something would've happened to you?"

"I know karate, I think I'd be okay."

"Against a knife?"

"I think so."

Daniel huffed. They were in the entrance, he whirled on Johnny. "While we're here, can you not leave my side without telling me?"

He didn't really have a right to ask that.

He regretted it.

It was too telling.

It was too greedy.

He'd been worried.

He'd been excited, to show Johnny everything, to have him by his side. He'd forgotten what it was like not to have him there.

Johnny was a senior too. He could take care of himself. He had *before* Daniel.

He didn't need Daniel to fight his battles for him, never had. He sighed and ran his free hand through his hair.

"Listen, I get it, okay? New city. You're free to explore. But like, there's stuff I want to show you. And I can't if you've wandered off and get in trouble with the teachers and banned to stay in the hotel."

"I didn't think you'd notice," Johnny said softly.

"Well, I did. You weren't there."

Johnny looked at him curiously. "Were you worried about me?" There was something in his tone. Amusement.

Daniel didn't like that.

"I *was*," Daniel said through gritted teeth.

He was still pissed.

He didn't know what to do with it.

So he held onto Johnny's hand tighter. "You think I get in trouble a lot

because I rub people wrong? Well, you also get in trouble a lot too. So I got worried."

Johnny looked a little startled.

He'd been playful about it Daniel realized belatedly. Johnny had been trying to be light. To try and brush off his concern. To try and show Daniel that he was okay.

Daniel sighed.

He wondered what had spooked Johnny. What had sent him into doing laps in another city.

He turned, Ali was sitting on the couch still. But the girls had joined her. She looked over at him and smiled.

Johnny stiffened. He felt it like a tremor. He looked back at him.

For a long time, he thought maybe Johnny and Ali might end up together again. He'd worried about it the entire time he had dated Ali. He'd thought about it when she suddenly was talking to Johnny again.

But now.

The look on his face.

The way he was retreating.

The mask was slipping.

He couldn't hide it, not fast enough.

Johnny didn't like Ali. He'd pulled away because of her. He'd left Daniel to sit and talk to her. He hadn't wanted to interrupt.

But he was all bristled. All tense.

"I thought you'd apologized to Ali," Daniel said.

"Just because I apologized doesn't mean we're friends," Johnny said stiffly, turning his head away, looking out the window. He was pulling slightly, away.

Daniel followed him. They found a different couch, one next to the window, hidden behind planters. Johnny sat taking a deep breath while Daniel processed.

Johnny had apologized to Daniel. They were friends.

He'd apologized to Mr. Miyagi and they were friends.

His mother and well they *weren't* friends but his mother liked Johnny and he thought Johnny was nice to his mom.

But Ali.

Johnny was fiddling with his Walkman. He zipped it into his pocket and leaned back with a sigh, covering his eyes with his arm.

From what Ali had said, Daniel had assumed. Had thought they were good.

"I was wondering where you were," Bobby said sinking down in the other seat, across from them. His eyes narrowed, "You okay?"

"Tired," Johnny said.

Bobby made a sound like he didn't believe Johnny but wasn't going to push him.

"He a flight risk?" Bobby asked Daniel eyes glancing down to where Daniel was holding Johnny's hand.

"Yes," Daniel said flatly.

Bobby looked surprised.

Daniel turned back to Johnny, shifting on the couch towards him.

He had to try something. He'd play the knee card.

He lifted his legs up and hooked them over Johnny's lap. It'd worked once before. It could work again. Johnny lowered his arm off of his eyes and looked down at him surprised. But he didn't move Daniel. Didn't push him off.

"Ali was the only friend I had for like 6 months other than Mr. Miyagi. So maybe I'm a little too forgiving that we're talking again. I mean I messed up too. I wasn't a good boyfriend. She really let me have it when we broke up. And when we talked it over later. I just missed being her friend. Your relationship with her is probably really different or was and it's probably all weird. And you should take your time. Be mad. Be frustrated. Be whatever. But don't you dare go running off into New York City and disappearing."

"Did you run?" Bobby asked leaning forward, his voice dropping to a horrified whisper.

"I didn't *run*. I walked. Sped walked. In a loop. Figure eights between this block and the next. I kept an eye on the time."

"Johnny!" Bobby admonished.

"I...I haven't slept okay? I'm on fumes. The 5 and a half hour flight being crammed between you two, while I like you two, was awful. I needed to move. And Ali...just was a little more than I could handle at the moment okay?"

The teacher started calling off names and Bobby jumped up when his name was called.

"This conversation is not over," he hissed.

"Damnit," Johnny sighed.

"Did you really not sleep?" Daniel asked.

"Tommy asked us to be at the school early," Johnny said.

Daniel got up a little reluctantly as the teacher worked their way through last names. L's were coming up, which meant both of them.

He tugged on Johnny's shirt. He'd just have to be like glue. Stick to Johnny's side.

The plans for the night were easy. They were going to break into groups.

Their group which included the guys and Ali and several girls would be going with a teacher to the Met. They had a special group thing that Tommy, really student council but Daniel gave all credit to Tommy, had paid extra for.

While the other groups were going to other museums, theirs was going to take the train to the Met where a docent would meet them and they'd get to hang around after the museum closed. A private tour.

Daniel knew Johnny had been in charge of herding students in the morning. Now it was Daniel's turn.

He made sure that Johnny's ticket worked, guided him to the right platform. Kept his hand tight on Johnny's sleeve.

No one said anything.

He made Johnny sit on the train and stood over him, holding onto the bars above. Listening for their stop.

He noticed he was walking ahead of everyone else. They followed him. Like he was a tour guide with a fancy umbrella. His umbrella was Johnny's tall blonde head wearing his blue jacket. Even the teacher didn't stop him from leading the way. Seemed relieved not to have to consult the map. Just followed along, trying to keep their group together.

Returning to the Met was like visiting an old friend.

It hadn't been long since he'd last been. Less than a year.

His mother had scrounged up money, taken them to all their favorite spots before they left.

They'd sat in the Met together in front of their favorite paintings, talking quietly for hours.

He walked up to where they were supposed to meet the docent. The woman smiled at their group and began their tour, walking them through the halls, explaining the importance of the pieces, the work, the history, the meaning, and the artist behind the work.

Daniel let his footsteps slow, and his fingers fall from Johnny's elbow. The back of his hand brushed against Johnny's and his fingers brushed Johnny's.

Johnny's hand moved and Daniel wondered if he was sick of Daniel babying him, of being dragged around New York City like he was a toddler who'd been getting a little too close to an outlet with a pen in hand.

Johnny's hand took his and Daniel glanced at him. His ears were red. He was very slowly moving his hand, interlacing their fingers.

Daniel blushed, heart-pounding too loud to hear the docent talk.

He'd held Johnny's hand a million times it felt like but it was always a surprise when Johnny took his.

Johnny wasn't mad.

He wasn't upset.

He was just trying to find his own footing.

Just like Daniel always was.

Trying to not follow old well-worn paths and carve out new ones. Ones where he didn't start fights but where he just stepped back and breathed.

They followed at the back of the group from one room to the other. They stopped for a while before the large painting of "Washington Crossing the Delaware" by Emanuel Leutze as the docent talked about it.

Daniel tried to breathe calmly.

Tried to force the blush away.

It was always one that his teachers had spent a ton of time on. So he had time. Time to try and get himself under control.

He had time before he could show Johnny his favorite.

The docent was charming. Full of facts. Johnny was listening closely. Or looked like it.

Daniel wondered, not for the first time, if maybe.

Maybe there was a spark there and it wasn't just him that saw it.

He breathed.

Now was not the time.

They were getting close to his favorite.

He wanted to focus on it.

To see it like an old friend.

They moved through the rooms and ah, there it was.

He pulled Johnny to the best spot to see it. Johnny came along with him easily. He glanced at Daniel. Daniel pushed himself up on tip toes.

"This one is my favorite in the whole of the Metropolitan Museum of Art," Daniel said softly.

Johnny studied it quietly. The way he knew he would. After a awhile he spoke, so quiet, almost a whisper. "It reminds me a bit of Mr. Miyagi's garden."

Daniel tilted his head. It was of a lily pond with a bridge over it. Mr. Miyagi didn't have either of those. But it was peaceful and full of nature. Mr. Miygai's garden had a similar feeling as "The Bridge over a Water Lily Pond" by Claude Monet.

"Yeah," he said softly.

Daniel didn't really care about the rest of the Met.

He liked the stained glass.

He liked the art.

He liked the statues.

He liked the books and textiles.

But it was more fun watching Johnny. The way he listened to the docent. The way he studied the art as she spoke. Eyes taking in brush strokes, color choices, the folds of clothing carved from marble.

When they entered the section on Japan they moved slower. Daniel's eyes were drawn to the paintings, the scrolls, the screens, the statues.

"Ah!" Johnny gasped at his side, as if he'd been looking for something and found it, he pulled Daniel along with him. "Look, Ryūkyū islands. " He said pointing to the little placard. "That's another name for Okinawa, where Mr. Miyagi is from."

Daniel looked at him, startled, and then back at the "19th-century robe" hung up. The pattern was different from the others, the coloring brighter with yellows and red.

Daniel had never paid attention before. He'd never noticed it.

They looked for more. There were a few things, a tray, some boxes, but not as much.

Before they knew it Tommy was coming over to them.

"Gotta keep moving fellas. Docent is already in the next room."

They moved, but dragging their feet, trying to quickly scan placards

on their way out of the section. Before Daniel knew it their docent was bidding them farewell into the gift shop that had stayed open for them. He let go of Johnny's hand there. It was too crowded, everything for sale piled together. But he kept an eye on him as Johnny gravitated towards patches.

Tommy appeared at Daniel's side again.

"So...pizza joint. I've been begging our teacher to let us divulge from the group and skip the burgers and let us go to some greasy hole in the wall to get pizza and I finally got the okay. But the teacher has to call and let the rest of the group know where we are going and why. So I need you to tell us where we're going."

Daniel thought about it. Dutch was walking past with a map of New York in his pocket. Daniel grabbed it and Dutch whirled.

"Dinner," Daniel explained unfolding the map. "So we're here. There are a couple of great places, but," he glanced at his watch then nodded. "Yeah okay, this one," he said pointing.

Tommy grabbed the map with a quick thanks and headed to the teacher.

"Hey I better get that back," Dutch called.

Daniel smiled and returned to where Johnny was still studying patches, picking one up and then another and putting them back.

"You going to buy one?" Daniel asked.

"I don't think so," Johnny said dragging his gaze away from the patches.

"Anything specific you're looking for?"

Johnny shifted his stance. "It's for my jacket."

It took Daniel a moment, but he remembered the last time he'd seen Johnny's red jacket. The one that used to have Cobra Kai patch. The discoloration.

"I don't know if I want to throw it out or...put something else on it."

"What about this?" Daniel asked tugging on the blue leather jacket Johnny was wearing. It showed off his eyes better. Made them brighter. Bluer.

"It's one of Bobby's," Johnny set the patch he was fiddling with back down. "Oh, looks like we're going," he said.

Daniel looked at the teacher who was motioning for him to lead the way.

Daniel took point again, leading them through the streets to a small pizzeria, arm hooked through Johnny's.

He thought about Johnny's red jacket. What Johnny could put on it.

It'd been like a leatherman jacket. The kind of thing sports kids wore, with a cobra's on twist on it. Maybe they could do something similar. If that was the case, now that Mr. Miyagi was teaching him, it'd have to be a bonsai.

But where would they find a bonsai patch? The bonsai on Daniel's gi had been made by the late Mrs. Miyagi.

It was the only one.

He pushed the glass door open and breathed.

That was so much better.

He motioned for Johnny to sit at one of the tables and walked up to the guy working and started ordering, motioning to the group of ten or so behind him. Telling the guy it was their first time having real *New York Pizza*. The guy grinned and nodded, filling up plates. Daniel grabbed a few and headed over to where Johnny was and sunk down next to him. He plopped the plate down with a flourish.

"Real pizza. No duck in sight," Daniel said with a grin.

Johnny studied it and picked it up. It flopped and drooped and Daniel laughed.

"You gotta fold it," Daniel said picking up his slice and folding it. Showing Johnny and then taking a bite.

He watched Johnny mimic him and watched him eat. He ate it quickly and Daniel slid another over to him. The guys sat down around them.

"Why's it so floppy?" Jimmy asked.

"Just fold it. It's delicious. I promise," Daniel said.

"Hey we got you two sodas," Bobby said putting drinks down in front of them.

"Thanks," Daniel said.

Some people liked bird watching. Some people went out into the wild and studied animals and stared at them for hours, taking notes.

Daniel liked watching Johnny. And this, watching him try the different basic types of New York Pizza was top on Daniel's list.

His mom made such a big deal out of food. And Daniel got it. A home-cooked meal was full of love and nutrients. But his parents used to take him out to get pizza. They'd walk and eat, talking about everything and nothing. He'd sit in the booths with his friends and they'd talk about school or soccer games and eat the same pizza. It was a different type of love. And it just wasn't the same in California.

And Johnny. Johnny was here. In New York. So close to where Daniel grew up. Eating the pizza Daniel had grown up eating. Greasy pizza that you *had* to fold because it was so thin and big and cost about the same as a transit ticket.

He wanted to kiss him.

To ask him how he knew that robe was from Okinawa.

What he thought of New York even though he'd only been there less than 24 hours.

If he was feeling better.

He thought it was what he wanted when he was older.

Maybe visiting family. They'd sneak out and come and eat pizza together in a good shop like this one.

If he was lucky, he'd get to keep Johnny by his side for a long time. Maybe they could get an apartment somewhere and Daniel would cook and Johnny would fix things and they'd have a shelf for their trophies and their bonsai. They'd get prints of gardens like the Monet and put them up on the walls, probably have a bookcase full of whatever Johnny was reading. And a comfortable couch so if it was a really good book Johnny could read it to him.

Daniel had to force himself out of the daydream. Of thinking of an

older Johnny and him. To pull himself back into the moment, so he could enjoy it.

"So?" Daniel asked.

Johnny cleaned off his fingers with one of the napkins Dutch had dropped onto the table and took a sip from the soda he'd been brought.

He was thinking.

Daniel was going to die waiting.

"It's no duck pizza," Johnny said slowly, a playful smile on his face, "But I see why you like it so much."

"Right?" Daniel asked. "California pizza is weird. A slice, a New York slice, is practically a meal on its own. You get what you pay for but in a good way."

Johnny smiled, that soft one. Listening as Daniel rambled about pizza because he couldn't help it.

"It's probably a good thing you didn't move to Chicago," Tommy said amused.

Daniel whirled. "That is not pizza. That's a pie masquerading as a pizza. "

Tommy laughed.

"What's Chicago pizza like?" Johnny asked.

Oh, this boy.

Let him keep his innocence.

But someone else would tell him.

Daniel sighed and held his hand a couple of inches off of the table.

"It's an abomination. The crust is about this tall. The marinara is on top, all the cheese and toppings are in the middle and it's a couple of inches thick. It's a pie, not a pizza."

"We should try it," Johnny said.

Daniel looked at him shocked. He opened his mouth to say that a true guy from Jersey, who grew up exploring New York City would never ever *ever* eat a Chicago pizza. It was inferior.

But if he got to go with Johnny?

He'd try it.

He'd visit Chicago with Johnny.

He'd visit anywhere with him.

That daydream popped back up.

Sitting in some Chicago pizza restaurant, waiting over 40 minutes for their pizza. But the wait not being a problem, because they were together.

"I'd try it once. Maybe," Daniel said.

Their way back to the hotel was peaceful.

Everything was familiar.

It had to be what Johnny felt when he was in California.

They checked back into their room at the hotel. Like the lodge, Daniel got ready first and then Johnny took a shower.

Daniel studied the books he'd brought and set out. Books about New York City, history, and art. One was on New Jersey.

Warmth flooded his chest.

Johnny came out and went to his bed, the one closer to the bathroom and door and they set an alarm for the following morning and turned off the light.

Daniel couldn't sleep.

He kept worrying that Johnny would just leave.

It felt silly.

Maybe he'd just stay up the whole night.

Make sure Johnny didn't go anywhere?

That was ridiculous.

But he stood up.

Maybe.

Johnny let the ex-cobras into his bed.

No.

There was no way.

They had *two* beds.

There was no reason for him to try and crawl into Johnny's bed.

But he *wanted* to.

He studied the body in the other bed for a moment, chewing on his bottom lip.

He didn't know what to say. What to ask. He knew what he wanted, but it was too weird to say. To explain.

Johnny moved and Daniel froze.

He hadn't thought of anything to say.

He began to panic.

He couldn't explain why he was hovering.

He could make out Johnny in the darkness.

His eyes were open, looking up at Daniel.

He didn't say anything.

But he moved.

He scooted back in the bed and held up the blanket.

An invitation.

Daniel took it.

Fast.

Maybe too fast.

He didn't care. He wasn't going to let Johnny take back that invitation.

He laid down, the warmth of where Johnny had been, and curled up on his side facing him.

Johnny lowered the blanket over them both. There was no escape for him. His back was to the wall. Daniel would wake up if he panicked if he tried to go for some late-night walk. Or...if he had a nightmare because he'd have to get past Daniel first.

"Good night Daniel."

It was very soft. Sweet.

"Good night Johnny."

Chapter End Notes

So the 19th-century robe is currently at the Met, but wasn't in the 80's. Everything mentioned is there now though it might not be displayed at the moment. But I got so excited when I saw it on their list of items that I wanted to include it.
Here are some links to the art/stuff mentioned
"Washington Crossing the Delaware" by Emanuel Leutze: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/11417 (This is like in every USA history book ever.)
"The Bridge over a Water Lily Pond" by Claude Monet: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437127
The Okinawan/Ryūkyū Islands robe: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/51083?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=okinawa&offset=0&rpp=20&pc

The Melancholy of a Ghost on Every Corner

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He was still trying to figure out which Daniel was dream Daniel and which one was real. He'd been wrong last time when he'd been sick. He'd been so sure that that had been a dream. But then Daniel had still been there when he woke up, when he felt better, and it *hadn't* been a dream.

But now again, he didn't know, as Daniel hovered over his bed, fidgeting.

Like a vampire, waiting for an invitation.

Maybe it was a bad idea.

But he lifted his blankets, an invitation.

He could drain Johnny, but he'd sleep better.

Dream Daniel or real Daniel meant not as many nightmares. If it was the real Daniel then he'd wake up with Daniel attached to him, but he'd at least sleep. He'd take either at this point.

Daniel sunk onto the bed next to him. And Johnny didn't move. Daniel would get close eventually anyway, there was no reason to roll all the way against the wall. He'd just get trapped. He didn't know what he expected Daniel to do. But he laid on his side facing Johnny. He wished him a good night and went to sleep.

Must've been the real one.

Johnny woke up with Daniel's head in the crook of his neck. His hair tickling his chin. Daniel's arms were around him. His leg over him again.

It was like Daniel tried to climb over him in his sleep, gave up about halfway through the process, and just stayed there.

His chest was pressed to Johnny's.

It wasn't spooning.

It was something new.

It wasn't bad.

It was gray. The alarm showed they had a couple more minutes left. Johnny braced himself, shutting his eyes, waiting.

When the alarm went off it took Daniel a while to wake up. Johnny felt his complaints, the little grumbles he made, like he'd rather keep his face buried in Johnny's neck.

Daniel heaved a big sigh, the rush of breath warming Johnny's skin, and he twisted, just slightly to roll and turn off the alarm. Daniel sat up in the bed and didn't leave, rubbing at his eyes and yawning. He stretched.

Johnny watched him.

"Don't go back to sleep," Daniel said when he looked over. "We've got a lot to see today."

Johnny nodded.

Daniel pushed himself out of the bed, like he had to give himself momentum, and headed towards the bathroom.

They were up and at breakfast early. The guys sat with them. Half asleep, as they worked on their continental breakfast, drinking coffee.

Daniel was looking more awake. He was going over the itinerary Tommy had brought to breakfast with him.

The other guests who were at breakfast were quiet men and women in suits reading newspapers, no loud classmates.

"Why?" Dutch asked quietly.

"Why what?" Tommy asked.

"Are we up this early?"

"We're going to the Statue of Liberty," Tommy said. "It opens at 9 am, we want to be there early because we've got a tour and a group. The

history teachers were adamant that if we were coming to New York that we'd visit Ellis Island. We've got a lot to get through today. So we got to be up and moving. And *you* get cranky if you don't eat. Which is why you're awake *now*. It's so you don't start fights with New Yorkers."

Dutch frowned. "You know those carts people use to move heavy things? Like fridges?"

"Yeah?"

"Why can't you just strap me to one of those and wake me up when you've dragged me to where we're going?"

"Because none of us would be nice enough. We'd lose your ass on the subway, or forget and you'd go rolling off into traffic or down into the subway."

"I thought it was a good idea," Dutch mumbled into his coffee.

"You'd die. Don't trust us with that responsibility. You gotta wake yourself up and walk yourself to where we're going," Jimmy said with a yawn. "If we gotta do it, so do you."

"What are you all even useful for?"

"I wonder that myself all the time," Jimmy said.

When the teachers arrived it was time to go. They'd all had breakfast at a local diner and came back with coffees in hand. Tommy went to work as part of the council and the rest of their group filed out to the bus they were taking.

Daniel sat with Johnny, pressing close to him, arm hooked through his.

Is he a flight risk?
Yes.

Daniel really wasn't going to let Johnny out of his sight the rest of the trip. He was going to stick like glue to him. A crowbar probably wouldn't be able to pry him off. Johnny didn't know whether to feel pleased or offended. It was nice. But he wasn't in danger.

It was a little odd to be somewhere so different from California.

It was cloudy.

It would probably rain.

It *rarely* rained in LA. Rain was an event there. A surprise.

The buildings were so close. People were walking *everywhere*. There were yellow taxis zooming around. The streets and roads were crowded. The buildings were tall. There wasn't a single palm tree to be seen.

It was weird to not see them. Like something was missing.

Daniel pointed at something, pressing closer, leaning over him to show him something out the window.

They were crossing a bridge.

Daniel was excitedly talking again. They were in New Jersey. The border was in the Hudson. The Statue of Liberty was technically in New Jersey.

It was chilly when they got off the bus to wait by the Hudson for their boat- "Ferry," Daniel told him- and for their guide to start talking.

Daniel was looking around, breathing in the smell of the water. It looked like it was revitalizing him. He was practically bouncing at Johnny's side. Everything was exciting to see again. The pigeons, the gulls, the water.

Their guide was talking about the Hudson River. How it used to have a floating church, that the ecosystem included over 200 species of fish *including* seahorses, and if they were lucky they might see a humpback whale that the guide joked might've gotten a bit lost.

Johnny thought maybe Mr. Miyagi would like it. All the fish. Maybe he'd catch a 14 foot Sturgeon, older than himself. The thought made him smile.

The river used to be full of oysters that kept it clean and the guide sighed, "One day we'll bring them back. Maybe at the turn of the century. But they used to be our staple food around here."

The Statue of Liberty was huge. The boat was getting close and he heard a click and a snap.

Johnny turned.

Dutch held a disposable camera in his hands and was taking pictures.

"Yo, Daniel," Dutch said. Daniel turned and Dutch took the picture. He gathered up the ex-cobras and tossed the camera at Ali, with a "Doll, you got good eyes. Do us a favor huh?"

She caught it and looked like she'd rather throw it into the ocean. But she sighed and took the photos then held out the camera like it was something disgusting and Dutch hurried to grab it.

He grinned and put it back into his jacket pocket.

When they landed it took Johnny a second to regain his balance. Even though Sid owned a yacht Johnny wasn't allowed on it. He hadn't been on too many boats.

Their guide talked about the statue and he listened. They started asking them about things they might know from their history class which Jimmy supplied. *Thankfully*.

Their teacher looked nervous. Like if no one answered the guide had the ability to fire him.

They walked around the island. It was colder. Windier.

"We gonna climb?" Bobby asked.

Johnny looked up at Lady Liberty then at Daniel. "I'll go to the pedestal. But you guys can go the rest of the way."

"Okay," Bobby said.

There were 354 stairs to the top. Johnny would drag his heels into the dirt, and hold onto Daniel's hand if Daniel even attempted it. Not with his knee still on the mend.

The guide had said there was an elevator to the pedestal. Which had a lookout. They'd take that.

It took a while.

The guys went racing up the stairs.

The teacher yelled at them. Embarrassed and apologizing to the guide who just laughed, saying they'd exhaust themselves before they made it to the top. They always did.

The doors shut. No one had joined them.

"You could've gone," Daniel said.

"We've got a long day ahead of us. I'm pacing myself," Johnny said. "And then tomorrow. And another flight the next day. I'd rather not be absolutely worthless. Tommy's going to put me to work again."

Daniel was quiet for a bit, chewing on his lower lip. After a while he spoke again, voice soft.

"Thanks."

"I'm expecting you to point out every cool thing in the view," Johnny said. Lightly. Half joking.

Daniel smiled. "Of course."

The doors opened and they stepped out, walking out along the top of the pedestal. Daniel pulled him towards the stone railing and leaned against it. He pointed out the buildings of the New York skyline, then led Johnny to another spot, pointing out the ones on the New Jersey side.

They wandered around a bit before making their way back down and waiting outside. Johnny found a bench and sat down. Daniel sat close to him, he talked about school trips. Told him about what the rest of the statue was like in a soft voice. The tight metal staircase. Telling him it was like being within a hollow metal statue. Because that's exactly what it was.

When the guys returned they slumped down next to them.

"Wore yourself out?" Johnny asked amused.

"That was a terrible idea."

"Since when is that new?" Johnny asked.

"Shush."

The rest of their day went by in a blur.

Ellis Island and back over the Hudson and up to the botanical gardens. Daniel pulled him along to a path lined with cherry trees in bloom. Johnny looked up at them in surprise. There weren't a lot of cherry trees in downtown LA, he tried to think of the last time he'd seen one, if ever. The white and pink petals fell like snow, covering the ground.

The guys chattered around them as they walked, Dutch folding and unfolding his map, and Daniel would lean over pointing things out, telling them where they'd go next. Johnny just took in the beauty. They made their way up to the forest with tall trees overhead. Daniel explained that the trees were over a thousand years old, predating the gardens and the USA as a country and Johnny felt infinitesimal, but not in the way that Kreese or Sid or his childhood bullies ever had. Without panic or fear, just a calm feeling of smallness amongst giant trees.

Daniel led them down to the conservatories and they paused on the boardwalks over the ponds looking out at the floating water lilies and lotuses, the water was dotted with bursts of color, of pinks, blues, yellows, and purples.

"What's that?" Bobby asked when they walked into the tropical ponds. The leaves were over 7 feet.

"Largest type of water lily in the world," Dutch said reading off from the brochure, "Victoria amazonica."

"I could sleep in one of those lily pads," Bobby said eyes wide.

"That does look like a comfortable bed," Jimmy agreed.

Their time was too short at the botanical gardens for Johnny, who bought a few souvenirs before they were all herded back to their bus. They were then dropped off around Times Square where they walked, visiting the New York Public Library and attending a tour that explained its history and architecture and shared part of its collection, a show at Broadway before they caught their bus again down to Coney Island.

They were let loose for dinner with a promise to stick in groups or pairs while the teachers headed off to one of the bars.

Daniel led him to the boardwalk, ordered him a cheesesteak dog and chili cheese fries then led him to a table and they sat down. The guys got tacos from a stand and found them fairly fast, the way they always seemed to be able to find Johnny.

"So what's worth a ride?" Dutch asked, sitting in the metal chair that scraped across the boardwalk as he moved it.

"Astroland is nice. There's bumper cars, a water flume, the cyclone, a tilt-a-whirl, and really a lot more. Depends on what you want to ride.

There are also arcades," Daniel said thoughtfully.

"Nice, we should do the bumper cars first," Jimmy said.

Johnny looked out at the big Ferris wheel with a sinking feeling. The first place he'd ever kissed Ali had been at the top of the Ferris Wheel at Golf 'n Stuff. He wanted to avoid the wheel. Hoped the guys wouldn't shove him aboard with hopes and expectations that he couldn't follow through with.

They finished eating and headed off to Astroland. Bumper cars were competitive but safe. They played a few rounds. Bumping into one another and laughing, the competitive streak burning.

Johnny felt arms reach for him after he got off the ride and pull him through the crowd when it was time to go ahead. Hands-on his arms, leaning close, Daniel's wasn't amongst them. He turned.

Ali had found Daniel. Her hand was on Daniel's wrist. She was leaning forward whispering something. Whatever it was Daniel didn't seem to like it. She said something else to him, she was serious but uncomfortable. And then Barbara was calling out to her and she disappeared into the crowd.

"What do you think that was about?" Dutch asked.

"No clue," Bobby said. "But she sure had been around more again."

"Kind of feels like she might be interfering with our plans, I don't like it," Jimmy said with a frown.

Daniel looked a little stunned and his brown eyes looked through the crowd, searching until they landed on Johnny's. Daniel smiled softly at him and hurried back to his side.

The guys moved out of the way, making space for him in their ranks. He looked melancholy but his hand kept finding Johnny's as they made their way around the park. Talking as they waited to go on the water flume, the tilt-a-whirl, the cyclone. They rode anything and everything. They played games in the arcade. Daniel laughing, beating them at the games he knew too well. Full of challenges that the guys rose up to meet, dramatically complaining when they lost.

But occasionally that look came back, distant, sad.

Dutch took pictures. He asked someone to take a picture of them in

front of the Astroland rocket.

Johnny wondered if they'd even be visible or if they'd look alien in the lights of the amusement park.

They stuck together. Johnny had expected them to pull away. But they seemed to notice the melancholy in Daniel. The way he'd get quiet as he looked around. Probably worried about whatever Ali had said. So they rode everything. Even the carousel. Riding on wooden horses.

The last ride they hadn't gone on was the Wonder Wheel, the Ferris Wheel Johnny had been dreading, and they were moving in that direction.

"You wanna go on that?" Bobby asked, the softest of whispers at his side.

The cabins looked big enough for six. If it wasn't just him and Daniel it should be fine. He nodded.

"How many in your group?" the worker asked.

"Six," Daniel said.

The worker nodded and held the door open. Daniel hurried on board slipping to the other side. Johnny sat across from him. The worker waited and Bobby hesitated but stepped forward. Dutch let out a sigh and joined as well. Soon all six were aboard and the door shut.

Daniel started pointing out the buildings, the view. Explaining what each of those twinkling lights actually was.

Then he got quiet, his hands were clasped on his lap, his fingers worrying against one another, not as expressive in the enclosed space.

"This was my Dad's favorite ride."

Oh. Of course.

Johnny had seen the photos.

The photos of Mr. LaRusso and Daniel at Coney Island.

"Good choice," Dutch said. "It's got a great view."

He seemed surprised by this, by Dutch's approval of his Dad's favorite ride, but some of that tension left. Daniel spoke, quietly, like he was

walking on unfamiliar terrain. Telling them about his dad. About how they'd come out here with his mother, that it was one of the last places they'd all come to before he'd been hospitalized.

The guys spoke softly to him whenever he stumbled, whenever he got quiet. They weren't letting the conversation falter. Keeping it going for as long as Daniel wanted to talk about it.

Johnny listened in that quiet space, just the six of them in the whole world as Daniel talked about his dad. About what he remembered from their brief 8 years together. The clothes he wore, like the sweater, winters bundled up in his dad's car, going around Newark. Trying to help him shovel snow on the sidewalk or salt the steps so no one would slip. Summers of holding his hand and ordering ice cream at the local shop, playing soccer together. How his dad taught him the juggling trick.

When their ride ended Tommy leaned out and handed the worker a twenty and the worker wordlessly closed the door again and they kept going.

Daniel talked about the soccer matches, his Dad coaching his youth league. Autumns of his parents working together on his costumes. His Dad taking his request and designing them, his mother doing his make-up. Going bowling together, learning to ride a bike, dancing in their apartment, hanging out together with his godfathers, their neighbors. Reading together.

How hard it was to watch someone you thought was strong, solid, and sturdy slowly die in a hospital bed and there was nothing you could do. No way to help.

Johnny got up, shifting into the seat next to Daniel instead of across from him, and the guys adjusted to allow it, moving wordlessly.

Johnny wrapped his arms ever so gently around Daniel and pulled him close. The worker didn't even bother opening their door, just sent them up again and again and again.

Johnny rubbed Daniel's back while he cried, so quietly into his chest, arms wrapped around him, fingers digging into his back, holding on tight. Johnny gently laid his head atop Daniels.

Johnny didn't know what to say. He'd never known his father. The replacements he'd been given, the ones he sought out, were nothing like the one Daniel had had, the one he'd found in Mr. Miyagi.

"We're really going to have to make you teach us that soccer trick," Johnny said softly.

Daniel laughed into his chest.

"Aw heck yeah," Tommy said. "I found a couple of places we could play, and a team we could play against."

"Yeah?" Johnny asked. It'd been a while since he'd asked Tommy. It wasn't something he knew about. Had been dragging his feet because of Daniel's knee.

Coney Island probably had been rough. Being on this trip, no matter how excited Daniel looked, probably was rough. The painful memories around every corner.

"I think it could be fun," Dutch said.

"You know what also sounds good," Bobby said with a sigh. "Ice cream."

Johnny nearly laughed. That was the tactic Bobby used with his little siblings. It was so transparent because he knew what it was, a bribe.

Johnny didn't want to move. He wouldn't. Not until Daniel let go. Until he felt him pull away. He'd stay there until they all ran out of cash to bribe the worker with. But it shouldn't have been a problem. Tommy had probably given the worker more money than they saw in a night. The problem would be when the time came for them to meet with everyone else and go back to the hotel.

Johnny wondered what Mr. Miyagi would say.

He didn't know.

He wasn't as good with that, comforting others, but he could be good at hugging.

Daniel was breathing, that practiced breath. Trying to calm down. Carefully closing up the box he'd opened.

Johnny watched them go over the top again, taking in the city lights.

He wondered if Daniel would notice if he kissed the top of his head. It'd be weird. Too weird. But he moved his head, ever so gently, letting his lips brush the top of Daniel's head. Daniel was so focused on his breathing, he didn't notice. But the fingers digging into his back

lessened their grip.

On another round, about halfway through Daniel started to pull back. Johnny couldn't help himself. He brushed tears away from Daniel's face with his thumbs. Rubbing away what streaks were there.

He looked okay. His eyes weren't puffy. They weren't red. His eyes were just a little glassy. No one would be able to tell. Except he was sniffing. Johnny held out his hand, palm facing up.

Daniel stared at it then up at him.

"I was reading," Johnny said softly, "That holding hands helps calm your heartbeat."

Daniel took it, fast.

Johnny interlaced their fingers again. He had read it. It was true. Some science thing. Daniel always did it, and the longer he held Johnny's hand usually the calmer he felt. The better he felt. So he'd return the offer, try to extend that comfort Daniel always gave him.

Daniel breathed deeply, sitting up taller. He looked refreshed in a way Johnny never did when he cried. He always felt gross. But Daniel looked like he'd had a good cry and was ready to go.

Daniel smiled up at him, a small one, and Johnny turned to Tommy. They could get off the ride now.

Tommy turned to the door, waiting for them to reach the bottom again, and motioned to the worker who stopped the ride and let the door open. The guys piled out with Johnny stepped carefully out, Daniel following along, still holding his hand tight.

They walked through the crowd and out towards the boardwalk again. They bought ice cream and worked their way slowly to their meeting spot. Where they and the rest of the group were supposed to meet to go home.

Daniel leaned against him on the entire ride home, holding his hand. The guys stood close on the transit, talking softly to one another.

The way to their room was quiet. The guys were yawning, dispersing to their rooms.

Daniel let go of his hand when they got to their room, as he pulled

away from his side to get ready for bed. He showered when Daniel was done. He wondered if Daniel would join him again that night. Or if he'd want to be alone.

He stepped out, dried his hair with a towel, it continued to drip but he didn't care and he made his way to this bed.

The light was still on. Daniel hadn't gotten into either bed, was studying the itinerary, leaning against the wall in his pajamas, chewing on his bottom lip. Johnny crawled into his bed and sat up. His heart was pounding in his ears. He was going to do it. He was going to ask. He was going to try and not seem like a nervous wreck. To not be weird. He pulled the blankets back at his side.

"Daniel?" he said softly.

Daniel had moved on to chewing on his thumbnail and he looked up, meeting Johnny's gaze.

"You coming?" he asked, motioning towards the beds. Oh god no why did everything that came out of his mouth sound weird? Why couldn't he just be normal?

Daniel smiled, seeming amused. He set the itinerary down and crossed over to the bed. He turned off the light and completely ignored his own bed, slipping into the space next to Johnny.

Johnny laid down heart racing. He was such an idiot.

"Goodnight," Daniel whispered softly.

"Goodnight."

Johnny woke to the alarm and a heavy body on top of his. He was flat on his back and Daniel was practically on top of him. Too close. Way too close. His thigh was pressed between Johnny's legs, his arms wrapped around Johnny, head on his chest. He couldn't hide that he was awake. Not fast enough. He was pretty sure if the alarm hadn't woken up Daniel then the sound of his heart pounding directly in Daniel's ear must've.

Daniel pushed himself up, muttering about having to get up early was cruel and inhumane. How people used to just wake up on their own and it was better for them. It had to have been.

He shifted up, hand going close to Johnny's neck. Pressing into the bed, taking his weight, letting it dip next to him. Daniel looked around their darkroom. The alarm was going off still. He seemed a little confused. Johnny wondered if *he* should be the one to turn it off. Daniel adjusted his position shifting his weight to his knee, thankfully the one on the outside of Johnny's legs. And he shifted back and over, misjudged it.

Johnny acted, arms shooting out to grab him before he slipped off the bed. He pulled Daniel close. And when he knew Daniel wasn't going to fall he reached out and slapped the top of the alarm, turning it off.

"Thanks," Daniel murmured in his ear.

There was really no pretending he was still asleep.

"Small beds," Johnny said softly.

He loosened his grip and Daniel shifted more carefully to get off the bed without falling off of it. He listened to the soft sound of Daniel walking away, towards the bathroom. He rubbed his face and breathed. He could still feel where Daniel was pressed into him. Wondered how much would've been read on his face if Daniel had looked down at him when he was hovering over him. What would've happened then?

He got up and dressed. Tommy had told him to dress nicely. Though Johnny didn't know why. The only thing on the itinerary was Central Park and some free time in groups. Maybe they were going to something like the opera. When Daniel was ready they both headed out to the elevator and down to breakfast. The guys spoke softly, it was too early. They were too tired. Even though not a single one of them had tried to score a drink. Not at the park anyway.

Their entire class made their way to Central Park together. Their teachers handed out pamphlets. Broke them into groups and sent them on a scavenger hunt. Homework.

Johnny turned with his booklet and pencil ready to get to work when hands grabbed his wrists and pulled him along. They rushed, as a group away from the center and towards Alice, and then the hands let go. Tommy took the pamphlet from Johnny and grinned giving a quick nod to Daniel.

"We'll do this," Bobby said taking Daniel's packet.

"Ground rules," Tommy said, eyes hard. "You two have to be back before midnight. Cinderella hours. I am going to get the key from the staff at tweleve sharp and if when I come to your room you are not in there I'm telling the teachers you snuck off. And we'll send out a search party. So you gotta get your asses home by midnight."

"What's happening?" Johnny asked uneasily.

Daniel had a look on his face. All serious. He looked like he was listening to a coach right before running a race. Like he was ready to win a 100-meter dash.

"Daniel's going to show you some places I couldn't get cleared for the field trip," Tommy said opening his bag and pressing a white envelope into Daniel's hands. "Since you won't be having dinner or lunch with us, that's your money for meals and also like transport."

"Seriously? How?" Johnny asked.

"We're going to run interference all day," Dutch said stretching. Like he also was going to go for a run. "Tell the teachers you two are with other groups. That we saw you leave with so and so. All day. Which is why you gotta check in with us when you get back."

"Here's the card to our hotel with our room numbers on it. Call if you get in trouble," Jimmy said handing a business card to Johnny.

"Be safe will you?" Bobby said.

"Go," Tommy said shooing at them.

Daniel grabbed Johnny's hand and bolted. Running through the park like the start of a race had begun. Johnny wanted to yell at him. His knee. His damn knee. He shouldn't be running. What the hell was happening? Where were they even going?

He had been looking forward to Central Park. Walking around, taking in the trees, he wanted to see the lakes, the ponds. But they were running. Down a path and out of the park and skidding to a stop on the sidewalk. The noise of the city suddenly coming back to life. Daniel stopped for a split second, looking around before rushing again, pulling Johnny along straight towards a beaten-up car that was idling. Daniel pulled the backdoor open and shoved Johnny in.

It was not a cab.

It smelled like stale take-out.

Johnny moved aside and Daniel hopped in slamming the door.

Wasn't it Daniel who warned Johnny about hopping into strange cars? Had he somehow dreamed that he'd caught Daniel in the morning? Had Daniel actually fallen and hit his head?

The driver turned, arm on the back of the other seat looking back at them. It was a teen with black hair and blue eyes. He grinned.

"Let's get goin' huh?"

He turned back around and Daniel put his seat belt on. Johnny scrambled to put on his as the teen pulled away from the curb, speeding off into traffic. His accent was thick.

Johnny held onto his seat belt for dear life as the teen cut other drivers off and sped.

Why were they in such a hurry?

They turned suddenly and Johnny scrambled to grab hold of the door before he fell into Daniel.

What the hell?

Who drove like this?

This, exactly this was why Johnny didn't like riding with other people.

Sometimes they gave driver's licenses out to everyone.

Like candy.

Or people just knew how to behave for the test and then were absolute demons when let loose.

Did this guy even have a license?

"Welcome home Daniel," the guy said flashing a smile.

"Thanks, Louie," Daniel said.

Johnny glanced over.

Daniel looked at ease.

Like being shaken around in the back of this car was normal.

Like this was the average way people drove.

Like this was safe.

There was no way in hell this was safe.

There was a hill, a bump in the road, and for way too long Johnny felt himself rise in the air, only the seat belt and his death grip on the door keeping him from slamming his head into the roof of the car.

His stomach rose into his throat, along with all his other organs wanting to escape to somewhere safer but there was nowhere safer for them to go because nothing was safe in this car going at this breakneck speed.

Was this how Daniel learned to drive?

Johnny was never getting in Daniel's car ever again.

Johnny was lucky he hadn't known, that Daniel hadn't killed them both.

This guy was going to kill them.

That was a truck that he darted in front of.

Nearly took off the back bumper.

What. the. Fuck. Was. Happening?

Johnny gritted his teeth.

He was nervous if he didn't that he'd bite his tongue.

Then he'd die.

He'd bleed out in the back of this car, this dirty car, with old take-out strewn around his feet.

Daniel was laughing.

Demon.

He'd gotten into a car with demons.

He'd lost it.

It *had* to be hysterical laughter right?

Johnny had that happen once. Where he started to panic. Wanted to yell and protest. Ended up just laughing and was unable to stop. It'd been horrifying.

But Daniel wasn't stiff and wide-eyed.

He looked so at ease.

How?

There were inhuman beings that liked to pretend to be human, in all sorts of mythos, lots of tricksters. Maybe Daniel was one of those. And he'd fallen for a damn con.

They were going to die.

And Daniel was just going to laugh.

They were talking.

These monsters he'd gotten into a car with, to be fair he was pushed into the car.

Johnny was never trusting Daniel again.

He'd been right all along. The kid had no self-preservation. Kid. He was older. Damn. Older people were supposed to be smarter.

The guy sitting up front was talking a mile a minute, his hands would leave the steering wheel when he spoke.

If Johnny wasn't frozen hanging on for dear life he would've done something.

He wasn't sure what, opening the door and throwing himself out seemed like one course of action he was contemplating but with their speeds he would not survive. The other was to try and lean forward and take the wheel from the guy and drive the damn car himself. He didn't think that'd go well either.

Johnny tried to focus on what he was saying, but he could barely focus. His heart was pounding in his ears.

They were going over the bridge, over the Hudson and he breathed.

He tried to breathe.

He looked out, past and over into the bay at the Statue of Liberty. He wondered if people got used to being near something so utterly famous that they didn't care anymore. He couldn't think of what it'd be in LA. Hollywood sign maybe? Maybe the Hollywood walk of fame or the Chinese theater? But it wasn't the same. It wasn't some massive landmark you could see for miles. That was just suddenly there. Like the Eiffel Tower or Big Ben. People probably got used to it. Stopped noticing.

Johnny tried breathing again. The name sounded familiar. Louie. Where had he heard that name before? Black hair. Blue eyes. White t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He almost looked like a greaser from the 50's. That name.

Daniel was talking and Johnny tried to focus again. He was asking about Nonni. Johnny didn't have a clue who that was.

Louie. Louie. Cousin. Daniel's cousin on his Dad's side. Junior. Louie Jr. His dad was Louie Senior. They lived in Parsippany. According to the maps Johnny had looked at that was about a half-hour away from Newark.

"So who's the blonde?" Louie asked.

"Johnny," Daniel said. He'd shifted forward in his seat, leaning forward, hugging the seat in front of him so he could talk easier to Louie.

"The Johnny you kicked in the face?" Louie asked.

"Yeah, that one."

"Ain't that the same one that beat the shit out of you constantly when you moved to California?"

Fuck. Louie wasn't a small fry. His greaser look highlighted muscles on his arms. Weren't Italians known for something? The mob. They were known for the mob. In New Jersey too from what Johnny remembered.

Johnny was going to die. This guy who drove recklessly was going to get revenge on a feud that Johnny and Daniel had gotten past.

"We're friends now," Daniel said, hand on Louie's shoulder.

"Uh-huh, sure you are. You know no one messes with our family and gets away with it."

Mob. He was in the car with some young punk who was part of the fucking mob. What the hell? Why did Daniel do karate if his family was the mob?

They moved through Jersey City and then were going over another bridge and Johnny spotted a sign for Newark.

Was Daniel taking him home? Why?

They worked their way through the city and down some sleepier roads and *finally*, Louie slowed down. Daniel's hand was on the seat next to him and leaning over him.

So close.

Johnny thought he was going to faint. But he followed Daniel's hand as he pointed out his old school. Listened as he talked about playing soccer in that field with his Dad and friends. That's the ice cream shop he and his friends would go to after school. Where his dad and he would hang out after a game. That was the best restaurant in town. Daniel had the highest score in that arcade.

"Still do," Louie confirmed.

Daniel grinned proudly and continued pointing things out. The movie theater. He'd snuck in a couple of times with his friends to R-rated movies. Only got caught twice.

His eyes were so full of delight. He was so excited.

They pulled into a parking spot and Louie got out and stretched. He shoved his hands in his pockets. He was trying to make himself as intimidating as possible. Johnny could tell. It was the way his old bullies stood. Before Johnny learned to fight back. Before Johnny stopped running and turned and started punching and kicking back. It was usually the roundhouse kicks that put an end to it.

Johnny was tired. He didn't want to deal with this. This posturing. He didn't want to fight.

Daniel was unbuckling his own seatbelt and stepping out of the car and Johnny was prying his hands from the door and his seatbelt and wiggling his fingers. They were so stiff. He unbuckled his seatbelt and

stepped out.

Louie stepped forward, arm coming down on the top of the car moving into Johnny's space.

"You watch yourself, beachboy, I've got my eyes on you."

"Your not my type, but thanks," Johnny said.

He couldn't help it. It was so ridiculous. But it worked. Always worked. Louie stepped back suddenly as if he'd been stung, eyes wide and Johnny moved away from the car. Beachboy huh? That was new. They were always the same. No matter where Johnny was. If he mentioned that Daniel *was* his type he would probably get fed to the fishes.

He took a deep breath.

Daniel was talking to Louie, animated. Pointing at things, asking questions and Johnny closed his eyes, breathing, feeling the earth beneath him. He was fine. He'd be okay. He wasn't really in danger. And if he was? He opened his eyes. He could run. He'd paid attention the whole way there. He could retrace it. It'd be a pain in the ass. But he could do it. And he had change. He could call the guys to send him a taxi.

He always had wondered what it'd be like to leave California. He'd been enjoying it but it was starting to sour. He flexed his fingers. The feeling was starting to return them. They weren't as stiff. He'd wondered what it would've been like to have gone to school with Daniel in Newark. If their roles were reversed. But it probably would've been the same. Lots of running. Hiding. Time in the nurse's office getting patched up and telling the nurse she didn't have to call his mom, he'd sit through class with a busted lip or black eye, his mom couldn't take time off of work.

Daniel made Newark seem perfect in comparison to California. But the world was the same no matter where you went. It helped if you had connections. It always did. Family or money. Daniel had family. Sid had money. He sighed. Rolled his neck. Whatever the hell this was he'd be fine. Daniel was his friend. Probably.

Johnny looked up at the patch of sky and breathed. He was fine. It was just different. New people who he didn't know. Things he didn't understand. He met new people all the time. At the country club, at the mansion. Louie was probably just being protective. The way the

guys did. He heard footsteps and looked at Daniel.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," Johnny said.

He would be.

He'd be fine.

He followed Daniel to the sidewalk and through the doors to an apartment complex. Followed him up the creaky stairs. Louie was ahead, pushing the door open to an apartment and there was talk. A wall of it that the door had just barely contained that filtered out.

Johnny took another breath.

He'd wanted this earlier. He'd wondered about this. It had to be that. It had to be Daniel's family. His friends. One or both. He should've been more careful about what he wished for. But that charming smile. He could fall on that. Even when he felt his absolute worst. Like the time Kreese broke his arm because he hadn't blocked fast enough because Sid had bruised his ribs because he hadn't been paying attention, hadn't gotten out of the way fast enough, and that night still had to show up and smile and be charming to people. On his feet for hours, still had to dance, even though all he wanted was to lay down and sleep off the pain. This wouldn't be that bad.

Daniel turned at the door after Louie went in and looked back at Johnny and smiled. "Hey, so Ma told everyone we were going to be in New York on a field trip and Nonnia demanded we visit."

"We?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah, we," Daniel said motioning between them. "Plus maybe it's self-indulgent, but I kind of wanted you to see everything. Like...I didn't think we'd get a chance again, not any time soon. And everything includes family. Because you will not get better food anywhere in Jersey than through this door."

"Because you and your Mom moved?" Johnny asked.

Daniel had already been smiling, but a blush formed, and he looked impossibly happier.

Johnny's heart fluttered. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. He'd go

wherever Daniel took him. He was so fucked. Sign him up for the mob.

It took Daniel a moment to recover but then he pushed on the door. "I hope you like saltwater taffy, Nonnio is going to give you a ton."

Nonnino, Nonnia. Grandparents? Johnny didn't have any of those. It had to be. Right? Or was it aunts and uncles? He was used to hearing tía and tío or abuela and abuelo. Were they going to be speaking Italian? He didn't know any Italian.

Daniel stopped halfway through the door and reached back and grabbed him, fingers on his shirt pulling him in. He hadn't touched Johnny, the way he usually did. For what felt like hours. Not since they'd gotten in Louie's car. This wasn't even close to how he usually was. It was strange. But he followed. Maybe Daniel in California was a different Daniel than New Jersey Daniel, different than New York Daniel. There were too many Daniel's to keep track of. He was collecting them all like figurines.

Had to be grandparents.

He followed to a living room filled with little knick-knacks and photos. He greeted an old man, Nonnio, and an old woman, Nonnia who smiled warmly at him.

Daniel was introducing him and they were shaking his hand warmly.

Nonnia pinched his cheek and then patted the side of his face. "Look how handsome this boy is, how tall!"

"Welcome, sit, sit, make yourself at home," Nonnino said.

Johnny sat where he was told, on the couch.

Louie hovered, frowning.

Nonnia smacked his arm.

He huffed and sat down next to Johnny, arms crossed, legs spread wide like he was trying to take up as much space as possible.

"*Limonata*?" Nonnia asked.

"Oh yes please," Daniel said warmly.

Nonnia nodded and walked away towards the kitchen.

Nonnino leaned forward grabbing a box from underneath a table and lowering his voice. He opened the box and a bunch of colorful candies wrapped in wax paper were in it.

"Help yourself," he said.

Daniel leaned forward from where he sat on the other side of Johnny and pointed them out, naming flavors, some Johnny hadn't even a clue what they meant. Like teaberry, or molasses mint. There were a lot of mint, "peppermint, wintergreen, and spearmint," Daniel said finishing up his list.

Johnny grabbed a molasses mint.

"Thank you," he said softly.

"So, what all have you boys seen?" Nonnino asked leaning back comfortably in his chair.

Johnny let Daniel answer. He was leaning forward, so excited to talk to his grandparents. His Nonnia returned, handing them each sweating glass bottles of lemonade soda, the ones Jimmy had ordered for him to give the LaRussos.

He smiled warmly, thanked her quietly.

Daniel told them about the flight, all the places they'd gone, where they'd gone to eat. Which had turned into a heated conversation about whether it was a good choice or not, why hadn't they eaten at so and so's, it was much better, but it was too far away or it had already closed.

The conversation got lost in food. Tangled up and when Nonnino and Nonnia were talking fast about people, places, and things Johnny did not know.

Daniel soaked it up. Like he'd been missing something and they were supplying it. All the updates of the neighborhood. All the news. The conversation bounced around, overlapped. They all spoke with their hands moving and it was exactly like Johnny had thought.

Nonnia occasionally would get up and get food, snacks, fruit, cheese and would hand it to Johnny to eat.

He'd catch Daniel watching out of the corner of his eye every time Johnny stood up to take what she offered him.

It was ingrained. He didn't know how to explain it. You stand when someone important comes in, respect your elder's stuff. Sid made sure it'd been one of the first things he'd learned. To show some respect.

She seemed amused by it. Smiling as he hopped up even though the boys on either side of him didn't.

She just wouldn't stop giving him things.

Food.

Like he was starving.

She didn't even ask if he was hungry.

He had been. But he really wasn't anymore. He was at a loss.

Sid's training didn't include Italian grandmothers.

"*Tesoro*," Nonnino said with a laugh, "You're going to murder the boy."

"Nonsense," Nonnia said, with a wave of her hand handing Johnny what looked like cookies in a little plate. "Look how tall he is, all that muscle. He must eat."

"Oh," Nonnino said, shifting back in his seat to grab a piece of paper off a nearby table. "Your godfathers wanted me to give this to you."

Daniel leaned forward and took it, flipping open the envelope. He read it quickly then stood up. "Oh! They're home!" he turned to Johnny. "I'll be back. Is that okay?" he directed the latter part to his grandfather who nodded and waved him off.

Johnny watched him leave. Leave him behind, with his grandparents and his cousin who was barely restraining himself.

Nonnia sat down next to him.

"How are you enjoying the East coast?"

"It's nice. Different," Johnny said.

"Of course it is," Louie said sitting up from where he'd been lazing, looking bored against the other arm of the couch. "You can't get away with the same shit."

Johnny stiffened.

"Louie Jr.," Nonnia admonished.

"What? You do *know* he beat the shit out of Daniel for like 6 months right? Terrorized him? And now, we're what, supposed to believe that Daniel and him are friends? You're feeding someone who hurt *family*. We don't do that."

Nonnia frowned. "Louie Jr. This boy has been nothing but polite. Whatever happened is between him and Daniel and Daniel would not bring a friend home he didn't get along with."

Louie grumbled arms folding over his chest again.

Nonnino chuckled softly from his chair. "LaRusso's like to talk. We find anyone who is quiet and listens and we latch on. Even you know that Louie Jr. have you even been paying attention? Or is that head of yours just decoration?"

Louie flushed with anger. "I still think it's messed up. He moved across the country and..."

Ah. Louie felt guilty. Johnny got that. "You used to protect him when he got in trouble," Johnny said softly.

Louie stiffened.

It made sense. Louie was bigger. Taller. More muscle. He gave off the air of a bully. It was how he carried himself. It was the way he kept posturing. He probably felt guilty that as soon as Daniel left his sight, *his protection*, he got punched.

Johnny had gone through this so many times, he knew how to make the bastard feel better. He didn't deserve it but he'd do it. He didn't like Louie. Didn't like the way he crowded Johnny's space with a menacing air.

"You do realize he won right?" Johnny asked. "I've won several times. He also got a lot of good hits in. Always got back up. He never ever gave up. Not in front of me. Ever. He's brave."

Louie stared at him. Then lifted his chin. "Of course he is. He's a LaRusso."

The guy had family pride the way some people did for sports teams. But that did it. His body language changed. He started talking. About school with Daniel. Back when Louie and Daniel went to the same

school. Before he moved. Before they both moved. All the childhood adventures. Exploring the local parks. Playing soccer with Daniel's dad. It was warm. Fond memories. And Johnny could see it. A young Daniel running around, biking through the neighborhood, playing soccer, going to camp in the summers, and being so damn bad at half the games but so enthusiastic that everyone was charmed.

Daniel came back after a while. "Hey," Daniel interrupted softly. "You mind driving so I can visit Dad?"

"Sure," Louie said and Johnny followed. Louie slapped him on the back. Hard. Three times. Laughing as he did so.

Johnny smiled, a charming smile. It was strained. He could feel it. He wanted to shove Louie. But he'd be disappointed in himself. And Daniel's grandparents had so many tiny porcelain figurines, he was sure if any roughhousing happened, if a fight broke out, he'd destroy their beloved collection by accident.

He followed Daniel down the stairs and back to the car.

He hesitated.

"Can we walk there?" Johnny asked.

"Easier with a car. We'll go to the florist first," Louie said with a grin.

Johnny breathed deep.

He pulled the door open and braced himself for the scent of stale fast food and the crunch of the wrappers, the stickiness of everything, and the awful awful driving.

Chapter End Notes

> Oh so many little fun facts in this one.
> They have been bringing oysters back into the Hudson by the way: https://www.riverprojectnyc.org/oyster-restoration
> Also as someone who has had to suffer through *multiple* rants about birds...gulls are seagulls. Just the term seagull apparently isn't a real term? So it makes some birding people go on a tirade about gulls every time they hear the word seagull. So thus gull = seagull https://www.audubon.org/news/seagull-or-gull-who-really-cares
> Also according to an inflation calculator, $20 in 1985 would be about $50.

7 feet (for the lily) is about 2 meters

Champions aren't quitters

They got into Louie's car and he drove to the florist. Daniel's mother had given him money, to buy something nice for Dad's grave. Asked him to stop by and say hi for her.

It was weird. Very weird to bring Johnny along. But when would Daniel get a chance like this again? To be back in Newark? New York was so close. It felt like a waste to go and not visit his grandparents or his Dad. But dragging Johnny along? That was pure selfishness. The rest of their classmates were exploring Central Park, were doing things in the city.

And Daniel? Daniel had brought Johnny home with him. Because he wanted to see it. He wanted to see Johnny on his grandparent's couch, see how he reacted to being given too much saltwater taffy for anyone to humanly finish in one sitting. It wasn't like going home during a holiday. But he'd wanted it. As soon as he'd realized they were going to New York. And Tommy had been so ready to help him figure it out. Didn't make it seem weird. Accepted it like of course Daniel wanted to show Johnny Newark.

Not their whole class. Not all of the guys. Just Johnny.

Johnny was so stiff in the back of Louie's car. He had been on the drive in. Daniel hadn't paid too much attention. Too busy catching up with Louie. But it was the same, as he'd seen out of the corner of his eye earlier.

He wanted to reach out and take his hand. But while Louie was dense as a boulder he couldn't keep his mouth shut. Guys in Newark didn't hold hands. Not unless they were together. And Daniel wasn't ready to explain that they *weren't* dating. Louie wouldn't get it. Would ask why not? And Daniel didn't know how to explain that. California was just different.

And Louie kept puffing out his chest around Johnny. Like he was a stupid rooster or something and was like we're going to fight. Absolutely ridiculous.

They parked and he watched Johnny stretched his fingers, little wiggles like they were stiff. How hard had he been holding onto the door?

Louie headed to the florist and started telling Daniel about everything else he'd missed. Then he stopped and lowered his voice.

"So what's with blondie? He your new best friend or somethin'?"

Daniel looked up at him with a frown.

"What am I being replaced?" Louie asked.

"It's not the same at all," Daniel said. "We're friends. He's may be one of my best friends in California. *Huh*. Yeah. But you are family, man."

Louie frowned but nodded, placated. Which was a relief. Daniel didn't want to go through how they were different. Louie sometimes didn't get things. It took a while for the sparks to get the idea going.

"You know he's kinda weird."

"Yeah?" Daniel said stiffly. Louie *was* family but he better tread carefully. Daniel had left them alone for probably an unrecommended amount of time. He better have been nice.

"Thought I was coming on to him," Louie said with a frown.

Daniel stared at him wide-eyed. How the ever-loving hell? Daniel had been working on trying to get through to Johnny for *months*. MONTHS! And Johnny spends five seconds with Louie and thinks the guys flirting? LOUIE! Of all people. Daniel wanted to scream. He breathed deeply.

"What happened?"

"I said he better watch himself, I'd keep my eyes on him," Louie said. "And he said *thanks but your not my type*."

"You tried to start a fight? Seriously?" Daniel was going to burst a blood vessel. He didn't know what he was more upset about.

"He beat the shit out of you."

"And I kicked his ass."

"What's even worth redeeming in him?"

"He's nice! He listens. He's-" Daniel paused, he was not going to yell at Louie in the middle of the sidewalk when Johnny could be right behind him. Oh god. Daniel turned. Wait. Where did Johnny go?

"Where is he?" Panic began to rise.

Dutch had told him he had to keep a hand on him at all times or he'd just disappear. He'd thought maybe it was a joke. Maybe he was getting played. But it was a good excuse in California to keep touching him. And in Jersey? But what if Dutch was right?

"He's about two blocks back," Louie said with a sigh.

"What?" Daniel said. "How can you tell?"

"Blonde and tall. He sticks out. Especially with that blue jacket."

Daniel was tempted to jump on Louie and use him to see higher. "Is he coming this way?"

"He's talking to someone."

"He's talking to someone," Daniel repeated unhappily. "Let me guess," he said sourly. "Some girl took notice huh?"

"You're the one who brought a pretty California boy to Newark," Louie said. "Ah, he's coming this way. He's got someone with him."

Daniel was pissed. Panic dissipated and now he was pissed. He'd already told Johnny not to leave his side and what did he do? Left his side and then picked up a girl. They'd been out of the car five minutes. The hell?

"Oh," Louie said.

"Oh? What the hell does Oh mean?" Daniel hissed.

"I see," Louie said softly.

"Yeah, clearly *you see*. Tell me *what you see* you giant."

Louie laughed. "He'll be here in a second and you can see for yourself. You're right, I'm pretty sure he's cool."

What the fuck?

Then Daniel saw him through the crowd. Blonde hair, blue eyes, bright from his blue jacket. He looked concerned. But he wasn't alone. It wasn't some babe. It was a kid. Absolutely sobbing, clinging to Johnny's hand. Johnny stopped next to them and knelt down to the kid.

"Where'd you say you were supposed to meet your mom again?"

The kid hiccupped, rubbing their face and Daniel caught it when the kid said it. He knew where that was. Johnny looked up at him. Damn. Okay.

Daniel knelt down.

"Hey, it's okay. I know where that is. We'll get you there okay?"

The kid nodded sniffing.

"Told you," Johnny said softly, a gentle smile on his lips.

Daniel's heart pounded in his ears. He was good with kids. This kid, how? Did the kid reach out to Johnny? Picked him out of the crowd to help? Or did Johnny see the kid? Hear the sound of someone crying? Either way...Daniel held out his hand to the kid.

"It's close," he said. "Let's get you home huh?"

The kid took his hand, didn't let go of Johnny's. They turned off the main street and walked a couple of blocks to the shop. A woman stood outside fretting. The kid let go and ran straight into her arms.

"Johnny Lawrence helping out lost kids, I feel like I see a new side of you every day," Daniel said.

Johnny looked at him. "Sorry for holding you up. I didn't know where it was."

"Don't worry about it. We're not in a rush?"

"We're not?"

Daniel glanced at him as they returned to where Louie stood. "You thought we were?"

"Well, you ran out of Central Park. With your knee...I thought..."

Daniel smiled softly. "Louie could only be parked so long. And then traffic can be abysmal. My knee's fine."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

He looked so relieved. Daniel reached out and patted him on the back. Similar to the awkward pats Johnny always gave him.

They walked to the florist and Louie held the door open for them. There was a middle-aged woman working, the same one that was always there.

"Good afternoon," she said smiling warmly. "Long time no see Daniel."

He grinned. "Too long."

She smiled, "Something for your dad?"

"Yeah."

He was a bit surprised that Johnny left his side. But he watched him out of the corner of his eye. Johnny was looking at all the flowers taking them all in.

"You want to make your own?" she asked.

Daniel never did. He didn't know anything about flowers. He'd only tried it once with his mom shortly after Dad died thinking it'd be a good exercise. A good way to express how he felt, but it'd come out weird.

"You do that here?" Johnny said. Interest piqued.

"We do. People have fun, or it has more meaning sometimes when you get to do it yourself. You want to sit and make a bouquet?"

Daniel didn't think he'd ever seen Johnny say yes to something so fast. He was sitting at the counter, all ready to make a bouquet.

"I'm gonna go to the cafe," Louie said. "I can't be in here too long." He sneezed. Point made.

Daniel made his way over to the counter and sat down next to Johnny. She was explaining the process and Johnny was soaking it up like a sponge. The way he did when Mr. Miyagi talked. She set out the supplies and then let him go. There were buckets of flowers around. He got to pick out what he wanted. And he seemed to know exactly what he wanted. Like he knew. Daniel watched him stunned.

He was grabbing white flowers, lilies, and peonies, pink and white carnations. Little blue flowers. Sprigs of green. It was pretty. He was focused. So focused. He really was good with his hands. So full of

surprises. Beautiful as he worked. Daniel liked watching him work. Liked watching him pick through the flowers, looking thoughtful. So damn quiet.

"Where'd you learn flowers?" she asked.

Johnny looked up, for a split moment. "My mother used to work for a florist."

Mrs. Lawrence used to be a florist?

Johnny stepped back, looking at the bouquet, then turned to Daniel. "What do you think?"

"It's good," Daniel said.

She laughed. "It's because you don't know what it means." She put her hands on the vase and pulled it closer to Daniel. "Peonies are for healing. Carnations, the pink ones are gratitude, the white is for remembering, lilies are traditional for graves, and the blue flowers are forget-me-knots. It's sweet. Perfect to give your dad. Someone speaks the language of flowers," she said with a smile of approval.

"I didn't know flowers had meanings. I mean I guess I knew roses," Daniel said.

"Each color means something different," she said with a smile.

"The owner of the florist gave my Mom a book. She gave it to me," Johnny said softly, looking a little uneasy under all the praise.

"I'll take it, and give it to Dad, if you don't mind," Daniel said. "I'm going to have to take you with me when I need to go to florists from now on."

Johnny smiled softly, proud but so fragile. Like he could barely let himself feel that. But it was better than it had been. She finished prepping it to set out on the grave and Daniel paid with the money his mother had given him.

Daniel pushed himself from the counter and took his flowers. "Sorry, there's a cafe next door if you want to hang out there. With Louie."

It was only a split second, but Daniel caught the sour look. Johnny did not like Louie. Daniel wanted to laugh. "You both can behave right?"

"I'll be good," Johnny said. Like he was promising he wouldn't get into

a fight.

They bade her goodbye and walked out onto the sidewalk. Louie was sitting at the outdoor seating. He waved.

"Johnny's staying with you for a bit. Be nice," Daniel said sternly. "I'm gonna visit Dad."

"Give my regards," Louie said.

Daniel felt bad leaving Johnny, but there were things he wanted to say that he couldn't say in front of Johnny. He went through the gates and climbed up the hill of the graveyard, the familiar path he'd taken countless times. With his grandparents, with his mother, sometimes on his own after school with his soccer ball or their favorite ice cream.

He walked down the rows, past other LaRussos, people Daniel didn't remember, people he liked to think kept his Dad company.

"Hey Dad," he said stopping and brushing leaves off the headstone, clearing away old dried flowers. "Been a long time huh? We moved to California if you can believe it. Ma says hi. She's good. Okay. Likes her job. Likes her coworkers. She's making friends, slowly. I never thought we'd move you know? Newark's where LaRusso's have lived forever. Or like in the area, you know? I was awful to her. Whole ride. A long time after we moved there."

Daniel sighed, sitting down gently holding the flowers in his hands.

"I thought how could we move? Not without you. Couldn't leave you behind. It felt wrong. But I couldn't say that. Couldn't say that moving meant losing all the things that made me feel connected to you still. Which is just so selfish, because before you got sick I'd been such a bad son. I was too cool to hang out with my dad anymore, with my parents. I wouldn't go with you to the movies. I wanted to go with my friends. I wouldn't play soccer with you. I played with my friends. And I've regretted it so much. I pulled away too early. If only I'd known. Maybe I would've gone with you more to do all the things we used to."

He took a deep breath.

"I was determined to hate California. Out of spite. On your behalf. On my own. But it wasn't fair to Ma. And you know what, California hated me right back. I went into it ready for everything to be awful. I got in fights. Not *fully* my fault. But I know I didn't help. But I got to meet this guy, Mr. Miyagi, from Okinawa and he taught me karate.

Not the stuff I learned at the YMCA, but like *real* karate. And I competed in this tournament against the guys who were making my life hell and I won. Got a trophy and everything. And man, you would've been so proud. I didn't get on the soccer team though.

"After the tournament the guy who tormented me apologized. He started working with Mr. Miyagi. I brought him with me. He made this bouquet. I like him. Like a lot. It's weird. I'm going through all our interactions since the first moment I saw him and trying to figure out exactly when and how it changed. I don't know but he listens and not just to like humor me. I don't think I've ever had someone pay so much attention to what I say. I always expect him to tell me to shut up and he never does. He hasn't yet. I just....

"Okay so you know my godfathers? I visited them. They left me this letter with nonnia and nonnio saying they were home and that Ma told them I'd be in town, probably with Johnny. And I did and I told them. Told them that I liked Johnny. The way they liked each other. And thanked them for like all their advice and taking care of me as a kid and you know they said it was you." Daniel laughed.

"They said that when you learned you were dying you went to them and sat at their dining table and told them you were dying and wouldn't be there... You wouldn't be there to watch me go on my first date or graduate, you wouldn't be able to teach me how to shave, or teach me how to drive a car, or fix a flat tire or watch all my games and tournaments, wouldn't be there to embarrass me before prom or see me graduate. You wouldn't be able to give me the talk. So you asked them to cover *everything*, because you thought, because I stared maybe a bit too long at the marble statues at the museums, that you couldn't tell whether I wanted to be the cool guy on the movie posters or if I liked him. But you didn't think Ma would be prepared for all of those talks. Or that I wouldn't be comfortable going to her about it. I mean Ma probably could've gotten some of it. But I think I'm the only kid who got such a comprehensive sex talk."

Daniel rubbed at his eyes and laughed again.

"I mean one of Johnny's friends asked if I knew how guys had sex with each other and so I told him. And man, Dutch seems like the most unflappable of Johnny's friends and he turned so red. It was hilarious. So thanks for that. Thanks for it all.

"Johnny and his friends have let me join them and it's nice. They're nice. I'm no longer scared of them. Not anymore. And like I talked to

them about you and my friends here. The friends I had in Newark...I'd mention you and they'd change the subject. They'd get awkward. The conversation dropped. Because they knew, they knew you and they hadn't had a parent die, or anyone they knew die. But these guys from California listened, they asked questions, they let me talk about you. And it felt nice. I cried. Like so much. But they just let me be sad. No "don't cry" or "you'll feel better" or "I'm sure there was a reason it happened" or "he's in a better place now". None of the shit people always say and it was just so nice. Who'd have thought? These kids who bullied me comforting me on a damn Ferris wheel?

"Which yes, I was thinking I might kiss Johnny there but then Ali, who I dated for half a semester, it was fun but she also dated Johnny and that's a whole different mess, and she told me that her first kiss with Johnny was on a Ferris wheel and that maybe our first kiss, if I was going to try and make a move, should not be similar to hers. And that's so damn hard. They dated for *two years*, how do I carve out a new path that doesn't remind either of us of Ali? Like we went to dinner and the movies and it was so nice. Basic right? Ma got us reservations at this great place. Had duck on pizza and artichokes in a calzone. But Ali and I used to go to the movies all the time and it was hard not to be reminded of her. I don't know how Johnny does it. They dated for so long. I've never had a relationship for two years.

"But I want to. And I kind of want it to be with Johnny. But I can't tell if he likes me. All his friends touch him all the time and I don't know how to flirt any other way. Heck Louie made more of a straight shot that got through to Johnny on accident than I ever have. And that's so frustrating. I mean, Louie?! Seriously? It was probably because he was posturing, but still! Oh. Louie says hi by the way.

"But he's also healing, right? Like his sensei, when he lost, tried to kill him. Like how messed up is that? Ma saw the results of that, heard what happened and after Johnny proved himself to be okay, she's like determined to have him over as much as possible. And she's befriended *his* mom, whose this fancy rich lady. She scared me at first. But Ma and her have gone out so many times now and she's so happy to have a friend and Johnny loves her so much. Ma is trying to find out if there's a chance you know? Like if I've got a shot. But apparently, all the Lawrence's are just like immune to our ways. It's not working. Just like all my flirting just isn't working. But he's getting better. Like he seems to be healing, and really that's what I should be happy about.

"I think you'd have liked him. He's full of surprises. And he's kind and

sweet and thoughtful, and I can't help myself but keep thinking of the future and all these things we *could* be. When we're just friends. But you always used to say your best friend in the whole world was Ma. And I like that. I'd like that myself you know? I like to think we're getting there.

"Uh, let's see what else. School is going okay. Graduating soon. Which I can't believe. I think the last big thing is prom. I don't think it'll be fun. I mean I don't think I could get to dance with him. Heck, a teacher would probably stop us. And then we graduate and then what? I'm determined to keep him in my life. I...I don't think I want to go to college. Ma will be so upset. Mr. Miyagi will be disappointed. He's like my other best friend. Me. 18-year-old kid from Newark befriended a like 50-year-old war veteran from Okinawa whose also my sensei. But he's full of advice and guidance. So don't worry Dad. He's watching out for me. Pulls me out of things when I start to spiral and calms me down, gives me so many chores to do that you'd probably love him. I think you'd get along. He's quiet. Works with bonsai and goes fishing. He's family, I owe him so much, for everything. "

Daniel sighed, leaning back. "I'm doing okay I think. I think everything is okay. I'm sorry we left you behind. But I promise we'll visit. It just won't be as much as we used to. And I hope you're okay with that. I think...I think you would be. Because you always wanted us to be happy. And I'm sorry. But I love you. Wish me luck with Johnny. I think that's where I need all my luck. Everything else is pretty good right now."

Daniel set the flowers in their spot, smiled fondly, and stood. "Love you Dad."

He walked back down the hill to where Johnny was sitting at the cafe.

Louie was talking, loudly. Daniel could almost hear him across the street. Poor Johnny.

He got a cup of coffee with them, sat and talked with them some more, then they went and hit up all the spots.

He showed Johnny the YMCA where he had been taking karate. They watched part of a lesson from the window and Johnny softly told him, "Mr. Miyagi was a better choice by a million."

They got ice cream, went to his favorite restaurant, got a soccer ball out of Louie's car and Daniel showed Johnny the trick, how to juggle

the ball on his knees, how to bounce it from one knee to the other.

Johnny looked so concerned. So worried over his knee. But he listened and he tried. He didn't do great. But he got a couple of bounces and he tried again and again and again. Determined. Beautiful in the setting sun.

Daniel liked teaching him things.

They'd have to do this at Mr. Miyagi's. Or somewhere else. He'd get it eventually and Daniel couldn't wait for the look on Johnny's face the payoff that there would be.

They visited Nonnio and Nonnia one last time. They gave Johnny a bag full of saltwater taffy, Nonnia kissed his forehead and Daniel thought it was adorable.

He wondered if Johnny had grandparents. If he'd known his. His world seemed so small. Just his mother and him, and then the cobras. Daniel would help him expand that. His grandparents would ask about Johnny whenever they called. His Ma would probably fill them in. But it'd be sweet and nice to catch them up on it.

Louie drove them back to Central Park. They still had several hours till they had to be at the hotel and Central Park didn't close until 1 am. Johnny held on tight to the door and Daniel promised himself he'd massage Johnny's hands as soon as they were in the park.

He wished Louie well and watched the car speed off into the night.

He took Johnny's hands as soon as they stepped onto the path into the park.

His hands were warm, soft in his.

He could not let Johnny leave New York without seeing the park.

He showed him all his favorite spots, talked to him about everything. They didn't have enough time to see the Delacorte Musical Clock or the zoo, but that was okay. There was so much more to see. And Louie had dropped them off in the perfect spot near the large iron gates of the Vanderbilt gate so they could start in the conservatory garden. They made their way through the sections of the gardens, starting in the French section walking around the fountain of three dancing girls in the center, and looking at the pink, yellow and purple tulips growing along the edge.

The tension in Johnny's shoulders began to dissipate. He looked at ease in the park. Daniel smiled. He knew Johnny would like the park. And it was nice for it to be just them.

Tommy had explained the assignment. The absolute chaos all their classmates had endured through the morning. Running through every inch of the park on a scavenger hunt. It probably had been a lot of fun.

But Daniel liked this, holding Johnny's hand and walking from garden to garden. Visiting the Italian garden and its wisteria pergola, listening to the birds chirping, and walking along the paths with twisty crab apple trees. Daffodils were in bloom in the English garden along with more tulips, striped orange, and yellow, dark purple almost black and white, and pink ones. Little purple lupine flowers grew lower to the ground.

They wandered out of the garden and down the rest of the park. Past the lake.

"Thanks for coming with me today. I'm sure it was...weird," Daniel said softly.

"It was nice to see all the places you talk about," Johnny said.

Daniel smiled.

"And your grandparents were nice," Johnny lifted up his bag of saltwater taffy. "I don't know what I'm going to do with all of this."

Daniel laughed. "Nonnio can't help himself."

"I'm glad we had enough time to come back here," Johnny said softly.

"Yeah? Was there anything specific you wanted to see? I was just planning to show you the highlights, of what's still open. Sorry, the zoo closed at like 5."

"There's supposed to be 161 trees from around the world. And the castle. We got to see the Alice statue this morning. And the literary walk."

"You did your homework," Daniel said impressed.

"Do you think there's enough time?"

"Of course. And you're in luck," Daniel said with a warm smile.

"They're all in the direction we're heading."

"Was it nice? Coming home?" Johnny asked softly.

"It was..." Daniel didn't know what to say.

It was weird. Something had changed. He was a tourist in his hometown. He'd changed but nothing else had. Louie was still doing the same things. So were the godfathers. So were his grandparents. So were the kids at his old school.

He'd expected something more. Something huge. Not like he was expecting a parade up, on his return. But yeah, he'd wanted a bigger deal out of it. He wanted it to feel like more. But really, showing Johnny around, watching the guys try things, everyone getting excited about things *that* had been fun.

"Was this boring for you?" Johnny asked.

Daniel looked up at him.

Johnny was frowning. "I mean for most of our class this is all new. We don't know any of this. Like seeing the Statue of Liberty every single time we crossed the bridge was still exciting and novel. But you grew up next to it. We could've gone somewhere else. Like on a cruise or to Paris or something. Somewhere new for you too. Instead of going on an adventure you just played tour guide."

That warmth bloomed up in Daniel's chest.

"I wanted to show you around. I wanted to take you to Newark, show you where I used to live, to walk through this park with you," Daniel said motioning around him. "But you're right it's kind of weird. I think...I think *I've changed*. I thought my life was in Newark. That I'd been uprooted and I was refusing to grow in California. I didn't want to. I wanted to come back here where everything was familiar. I wanted everything to be the same way it used to be. But it's not. Because nothings the same. The memories are here and there, but they're also like in everything else. Like the stuff Mom and I do. In our memories. He's always going to be there, like when I play soccer or when I go through his old clothes or the photo albums. But I didn't realize how much of my memories were in Newark. Of Dad. I mean I think I was drowning. Haunted by everything. Every street corner we stood on together. So when we left. It felt like we left him behind. But we didn't. Not really. And I tried so damn hard not to put down roots in California that I think I sabotaged myself at every opportunity. Like

I was trying to punish myself for being a shitty son so I just became a worse one."

Johnny's hand tightened around his and Daniel blinked, he used his other hand to brush away tears.

"You're not a shitty son," Johnny said.

Daniel laughed. "I whined. The whole way to California. Complained for months after we moved. I used you as an excuse to not try."

"I beat you up. You had a right to complain and not feel safe in California. To want to go back to somewhere you felt safe. I-I always tried that."

Daniel glanced at him again. He wondered where Johnny felt safe. Why he'd need to...how bad had things been? Daniel remembered the photo of Johnny as a kid. Worn. The few that Mrs. LaRusso had that she carried on her person because they were the only copies she had. She didn't have books full like his mother. She used to work at a florist. What had happened? He shifted his hand in Johnny's, lacing their fingers, rubbing his thumb over the back of Johnny's hand.

"I'm so sorry about that Daniel." There's so much regret in his voice. Every time he said it, it didn't lessen it. Like it was an endless pool with no bottom.

"I know."

"Your Mom loves you a lot you know. I really really doubt she's upset with you over complaining."

"I wasn't just a shitty son to her. I'm working on that. I have time. But with Dad. I was there when he died. But before that, before he got sick, I pulled away. Stopped meeting him to do stuff. Stopped hanging out with him. Wanted to be anywhere I could be but with my parents. And I did the same stuff to Mom when I got to California. I was embarrassed by her everywhere we went. Of her. Of our car. Of our home. Of my bike. Because everyone seemed cooler. Because all I knew, like straight off that night at the beach was the cool kids all lived in Encino Hills and had bikes and fancy radios and lived in mansions and I wanted all these different things at once. If I was going to be stuck in California I wanted to be cool. I wanted to be someone else. *Anyone else.* But I also wanted to be back in Newark. Where I knew everyone. Where I knew the best place to eat, where I could keep learning karate at the Y, where I could see my grandparents and

family whenever."

"Mr. Miyagi is a million times better than that teacher at the Y," Johnny said. It was sour. Like he needed to defend Mr. Miyagi. Which was hilarious because Daniel wouldn't trade his lessons with Mr. Miyagi for all the gold in the world. He laughed. But he loved it. Loved Johnny's need to come to this hypothetical Mr. Miyagi's defense. Totally unnecessary but sweet.

"I wouldn't trade it. I agree. Mr. Miyagi is better and I'm so lucky." He took a deep breath. "I had a point. I always lose my point."

"Didn't want to be in California but came home and things were weird?"

Bless him for listening. For following along with the unorganized chaos of Daniel's mind.

"Right. Thanks. Coming home and seeing Louie and he was the same like nothing changed. But I have. And it's weird. Weird to think I have changed because it doesn't *feel* like I've changed. Other than being better at karate. Like I didn't notice I'd changed until I came home and saw who I used to be and how I don't fit that anymore. Or like I'm starting not to. I'm sure I'm still a brat to Ma, but like I think I'm getting better. It's- okay- so I once went back to my elementary school after I was in high school and like walked into our school library and around and everything was so damn small and I didn't remember it being small because *I'd been small* at the time and it like hurt my brain for a minute because it was different. It felt like that.

"And I realized that like this was fun, right? I liked showing everyone how to eat pizza in New York, showing you my favorite art at the museum, walking around to all the tourist spots. And I liked that everyone paid attention to me when I talked. I liked being an expert. But I think, oh god, I think I *like* living in California. Like I miss Mr. Miyagi and the sun and the garden and driving past the beach. There's coast here and it's different. LA is busy but it's not New York busy. Like I missed a lot and it's nice to be back...to visit. But I think when I stopped paying attention I got comfortable. It liked wormed its way in and I put down roots. Like I like hanging out with you and the guys. And I realized I'm not scared of them anymore. Like I don't like panic as much when they're around. And that's like, I don't know when exactly that happened but it's nice. And I like going on our adventures, exploring.

Maybe it'd have been cool to go somewhere else. But I don't think, if I'd stayed in Newark I would've gotten to go somewhere on a trip like this. On a plane with all my classmates. It was, nice. All of this was nice."

They were passing the great turtle pond, they'd see the castle soon.

"How about you?" Daniel asked. "How do you like New York?"

"It's different," Johnny said. "But this? I like this. I don't know if I'd have enjoyed it as much, without your insider info."

Daniel grinned. "Well prepare to enjoy one of those things on your list."

Daniel waved his hand as they turned the corner and took in Belvedere castle. Daniel remembered coming with his Dad, before it'd opened, when it'd been in disrepair. But it was looking good. It was still open and they could climb up and lookout. Daniel pointed things out with a warm smile, pointed out where they'd come from and which direction they were going to.

Johnny took it in, he looked so peaceful. So different from the car, from walking around Newark. He had to know.

"Was it okay that we went to Newark today instead of staying with everyone else?" Daniel asked as they walked back down and towards Strawberry Fields and the Peace Park Johnny had wanted to see with all the trees from around the world.

"It was. Though..."

He seemed to regret putting that in, the caveat. The complaint.

Daniel had to know, heart racing, what had been bad, all of it? Had it been weird? It was weird. He'd thought it'd be nice. He wanted everyone to meet Johnny. As if they were already engaged. Fifty steps ahead. His brain always ran too far ahead. He wanted to see Johnny interact with his grandparents. With his hometown. To take that little piece of California, one of his favorite parts of California, and fold it into Newark, see how it fit, how it worked.

"Though?" Daniel pressed, softly.

"Can I...could..."

He wanted to ask for something. Daniel blinked. When had Johnny ever asked him for something? Daniel just took things, every step along the way. Johnny's hand, all the space he was given, Johnny's time.

He waited.

Johnny took a deep breath, "If I ever- if we ever come out this way- if your family ever visits...I never want to be in a car with Louie driving ever again."

It'd been such a struggle to get that out. Daniel laughed.

"That bad?"

"Please, not ever, ever again."

Oh god, please really did things for him when it came from Johnny's lips. He smiled warmly at Johnny.

"He drives a little recklessly."

"A little?" Johnny asked, incredulous.

Johnny Lawrence really went all for driving safety huh?

"You weren't scared when I drove you around," Daniel said warmly, voice low, it hadn't ever worked before, trying to flirt, to use that specific tone that had worked with other people.

Maybe Daniel was bad at flirting. But his ego couldn't stand the thought of that. So he pushed it away. He should've taken Johnny along the Bow bridge, it was one of the romantic spots in the park. But this was faster and there was somewhere he wanted to get before it closed. Because he knew Johnny would be shocked. He wanted to see his face.

"You drive like a normal person. You care about your car. Respect it."

Johnny's nose was wrinkled. Like he was thinking with disgust at Louie's car. Yeah, it was messy. Yeah, Louie didn't take care of his car in the same way that Mr. Miyagi had trained Daniel to. The loving respect Johnny heaped onto his Avanti. Night and day.

"Had a rough time with Louie all around huh?" Daniel asked with a sigh. "Sorry about that."

"It's fine. I'm used to...guys like him."

Guys like him? They were walking along the trees now. Johnny was quiet, it was a quiet part of the park. They couldn't be loud.

"Guys like him?" Daniel whispered.

"They don't like me, your cousin had a reason at least...but I'm used to...it's a type. We never get along. I've met lots of Louie's."

Daniel remembered the guys talking about how Johnny always got into fights. How they didn't know who or where. Was it that type? Was that what he meant? He thought Louie was going to pick a fight with him? Daniel wouldn't have allowed it. Would've reigned Louie in. Kicked Louie's ass himself. He sounded so sure. Like it was normal. A part of life. Guys like Louie just didn't like him. And he knew plenty of Louie's.

Had the thing he'd said to Louie that threw him off. That made Louie think Johnny misunderstood and thought he was flirting...had that been to get Louie to back off?

He'd been so distracted by being home. So excited he hadn't noticed Louie being a dick. He tried to remember. He'd seen Louie crowd, Johnny at the car, but he'd backed off pretty quick. That had to have been it. Diffusing the situation with a feint.

"I'm sorry about Louie," Daniel whispered. "I wouldn't have let him, you know."

He didn't know. That was the thing. He didn't know people were in his corner. Every once in a while Daniel got a hint. A moment where a piece of Johnny's life settled into place. Where he understood for a second how much he just didn't know. That Daniel didn't know, hadn't known.

He felt anger rise up. One day, one day Johnny would know he wasn't alone. That he had people in his corner who weren't going to leave, and Daniel was going to engrave his name at the top of the list, it wouldn't get crossed out, it'd be permanent. He'd have Johnny's back. He'd be there if he needed help, even if he didn't ask for it. Mr. Miyagi didn't want him to be out starting fights but maybe it'd be okay if Daniel put an end to them. If it was for Johnny he was sure Mr. Miyagi would understand.

One day.

One day Johnny wouldn't see guys like Louie and go on the defense. Wouldn't expect the worst. Because he'd have Daniel with him to diffuse the situation, or his friends to back him up. And he'd know that.

Daniel would keep him safe.

Johnny would laugh at him if he said it aloud though. Probably.

They looked at the trees, all the different ones, and then made their way down Terrace Drive to Johnny's last request. They pause for a moment at Bethesda Fountain visiting *The Angel of the Water* and then heading down the straight shot, the only straight path in the park of the Mall. The literary walk under the canopy offered by the twisty American Elms, they stopped to look at the statues of authors, Johnny studying them.

Daniel didn't know all of them. But he always found Shakespeare fun. The way the statue stood looking down at people with his hand on his hip, all serious despite those puffy shorts and tights. Daniel couldn't ever take it seriously. The name "literary walk" made it seem like there were a lot more statues than there were. And Daniel felt a little bad for Johnny who probably had expected more. There were only four. And Daniel only knew who one of them was. But they'd follow the path and get to where he wanted to be.

"I can't believe we fly back tomorrow," Daniel said softly. "You want the aisle seat?"

"What about your knee?"

"It's fine Johnny. I talked to Mrs. Fletcher and she cleared me. For stuff like that."

"You talked to her again?" Johnny asked. He sounded worried.

"It was pro bono, don't worry."

"When did you talk to her? What did she say?"

That was what Daniel had wanted that time before from Johnny. That desire to know. The need. The worry. But now he just felt bad.

"She said it's healing well. I keep it up at home. And not doing gym and whatnot. So like don't worry about our little run earlier today, or the soccer lesson or this long walk. It's fine. I can't do anything like

super strenuous. Like playing an actual soccer game, yet. But I'm getting there. Maybe by summer."

"We'll play this summer," Johnny said.

It was like a promise. And Daniel would take it. Whatever Johnny's plans were for the summer, they were going to spend it together. He'd make sure of it. He was sure the guys had plenty of things they'd want to do, to celebrate their freedom. The end of high school. The end to an era.

Daniel wanted to be swept up in the revelry with them. To celebrate in the style they surely would have.

It was a good walk and what they were going to do next, that was going to exhaust them more. Daniel was going to sleep well. And he hoped Johnny would too. To banish the nightmares and just sleep without dreams. Unbothered for the night. It was April. It was coming to an end, but it was still there. A nice overlap between winter and spring. The Wollman Rink, with people skating on the ice.

"Have you ever ice skated before?" Daniel asked leading Johnny down the path to where they could rent skates.

Johnny's eyes were wide, shocked that it was still open. Daniel smiled, proud of himself.

They got their skates, Daniel managed to beat Johnny out, prepared this time to buy their skates. He had the money that Tommy had given him. It was that time of night where the lights were on and it was mostly couples. They were able to put the candy and their shoes in a locker and then put on the skates.

They stepped onto the ice and Daniel turned on it, waiting to watch Johnny. He was prepared for practically anything. Johnny doing that low gravity waddle that first-timers did or for him to skate past like a pro. Either way, Daniel wanted to see.

Johnny stepped carefully onto the ice, brows knit in concentration, and Daniel held out his hands toward him. He would not let Johnny fall, even if it meant both of them going down.

Johnny moved one foot in front of the other, shifting his weight, hand out towards the side, the wall, the way kids did.

Daniel intercepted, took that hand in his. He could do this. He grinned

at Johnny with a supportive smile. He'd talk him through it. Tell him what to do. Praise every correct move. Every time he tried. He could skate backward. It wouldn't be a problem. Plus he'd probably look cool.

Johnny looked a little shocked when Daniel caught both his hands in his but that was fine. It'd be perfect.

He started to move, pulling Johnny along with him. Explaining how to do it, telling him he'd had the right idea. How smart. Intuitive. Johnny was so intuitive. Such a quick learner.

He was red. That beautiful blush, but his eyes didn't leave Daniel's. Doing as Daniel said, it was too much power and it'd go straight to his head. Daniel smiled. Explained how to stop, how to move his skates, how to fall without hurting himself, and then they practiced the fun stuff, gliding, and swizzles.

Yeah, swizzles.

Johnny let out a little laugh at it. A puff of laughter rather.

They'd done a couple of rotations.

"You're doing great. I'm going to skate next to you now, think you're ready?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah," Johnny said.

Daniel grinned, let go, and did a flashy spin because he *had to*, there was no way he couldn't. The fact Johnny was there just made it impossible not to show off.

When he stopped he skated back to Johnny and took his hand. Skating with him.

"See?" Daniel said. "You're doing great. Have you skated before?"

"Not on ice."

Johnny's face was turning pink. It wasn't that cold out, but the ice made it cold. There was music playing and it was like dancing.

He wondered if they could dance at prom. If that'd even be possible. Would Johnny even be going? Would he get a date?

"Your mom used to work at florists?" Daniel asked after a while.

"Yeah, when I was little."

"What happened?"

"The shop went under. Had to shut down, I think I was in kindergarten," Johnny said softly. "It took everything with it when it closed."

Everything?

"It was Mom's favorite job. She liked it. They paid her enough. They didn't mind me hanging around. They liked to teach me the flowers and how to do everything when I was little and hung around. There was a joke, that when I grew up I could work there too."

There was longing in his voice for a place long gone, for a broken promise. A little bitter over what could've been.

Daniel held his hand tighter. He spoke quietly. Told Johnny about his mother's jobs. The ones she hated. The one she'd liked.

"Was the florist before Sid?" Daniel asked softly. "How many jobs did your Mom have before she met him?"

He tried to picture her before Sid. Before the mansion and couldn't. The mother who had such few pictures of her only son, who only had the memories and it didn't make sense.

To his surprise, Johnny told him. All the jobs Mrs. Lawrence had held. For the long term like the florist who'd seen her through her surprise pregnancy and supported her until it went under, to the awful secretary jobs where she wasn't paid enough and her bosses yelled at her for things they didn't tell her to do but expected her to do, trying to clean homes but never finding enough jobs to do so, coming home too tired to move, to the awful waitressing jobs that never paid enough.

Daniel couldn't imagine Mrs. Lawrence cleaning homes, waitressing, on her feet all day utterly drained. Couldn't imagine her as anyone other than the beautiful woman he'd met the first time, so self-assured and confident.

Johnny spoke softly as they skated, talking about his Mom. About their life in Reseda. Their first apartment, smaller than Daniel's. Losing it and moving someplace even smaller. A studio apartment for the two of them. Losing that. The reverse of hermit crabs that line up when

they find a large shell to wait for other hermit crabs to appear so they can upgrade to something that fits better. A whirlwind of downsizing until it was just them and their car.

"No matter what Sid does. As long as she's safe and happy. It doesn't matter," Johnny said softly. "That is all that matters."

There was something he wasn't saying. Something he was holding in. Something bad. Daniel sped up, turning back around, so he was skating backward again looking at Johnny. He took the other hand in his the way he had when Johnny was practicing in his own. His heart was aching. How did anyone let Johnny get this far without any sort of comfort? Some sort of care?

"It *does* matter," Daniel said. "What every he does, he shouldn't be doing. Never should've. Do you not tell your Mom? Does she not know?"

Johnny shook his head. "She's been through enough. I don't tell her. Sid doesn't tell her. At first...he told me he'd send me to military school or boarding school overseas if I tried to tell her. Far away. I didn't want to leave her. Other kids didn't like me. The thought of being trapped with kids who didn't like me...so I just went to all the fancy prep schools he sent me to. I tried really hard. But it never worked. They didn't like me. He didn't like me. Still doesn't. But he doesn't hit me as much anymore. I'm too big. Too strong."

Johnny had a look. Like he kind of regretted saying anything, opening up. But Daniel was going to keep that door open, shove his foot, and then his whole body in the way so it couldn't close again. He'd make his way in and start cleaning. He'd do his best, to find wherever Johnny was hiding and take his hand and pull him out with him.

"Your mother would believe you," Daniel said softly.

"I know. But then...where would she go?"

"Where would you go?" Daniel stressed. "You realize you're the kid right?"

Johnny gave him a look. A look like I'm not a kid. I'm not an important party to worry about.

"I'd drive out of the valley. There's a lot of motels that you can stay at long term, cheaper further from the city."

Oh shit. He'd thought this out. He had a plan, in case. Daniel tightened his grip on Johnny's hands. Why wasn't it something like I'd go stay with one of the guys? Heck, stay with Daniel or Mr. Miyagi? Why was it to leave out on his own? Did he-did he think he was a burden no matter where he went? Daniel remembered how nervous Johnny had been when he'd dragged him home for dinner after kata. Every time he did it his mom loved it but Johnny hovered at the doorstep uneasily. He always had to pull him into the house. Like he didn't know how to just show up somewhere uninvited. To take up space that'd already been offered to him. Like everything was ice over a frozen lake and if he put his weight on it it'd crack and he'd fall through and drown.

He'd expected an I don't know or a I'd figure it out when it came up. Not a plan. Not like he had a pile of them set aside and it changed by the day.

"You know you could go anywhere right? Like to Mr. Miyagi's or my place? Or any of the guys's?" Daniel said softly.

Johnny frowned. "I know but-"

"No buts," Daniel said firmly. "You are *not* a burden. And you shouldn't have been in the situation you've been in for so long. You deserve to be somewhere safe. Somewhere you *feel* safe. Where you're not worried about things. Where you can sleep. Have you-have you been sleeping on this trip?"

Johnny nodded. That was a relief at least. Johnny was sleeping. Even though he knew Johnny had been awake when he got up that morning. There'd been no way to avoid it. When he'd nearly fallen off the bed. Which meant Johnny knew he'd slept like an octopus, wrapping himself around Johnny.

Daniel breathed. That wasn't to be worried about now. The takeaway was that *despite that* Johnny slept. Maybe the cobras were onto something. Johnny slept better when he wasn't alone. The problem was how to continue that away from trips?

He couldn't believe the two of them had been homeless. Had been living in their car. No wonder Mrs. Lawrence only had a few pictures of Johnny. His heart was aching. Did the guys know?

Johnny clearly kept himself in a box, trying to not take up any space other than what had been allotted to him. Every time he'd tried to take up more space he got burnt. Hell Daniel had burnt him for it a

couple of times.

There was something he wanted to do. He glanced around, they wouldn't knock anyone down or trip them if they went falling to the ice. He let go of Johnny's hands and slowed, lifting his arms. Johnny wasn't good at slowing down so his eyes widened in panic but Daniel tried to make it obvious as much as possible, he cupped Johnny's face in his hands, pulling him down as he pressed himself up on his skates so he could try and look Johnny in the eyes.

"Wherever I am you are *always* welcome, okay? No stipulation. No advanced warning. You are not a burden. You never have been. When you graduate, forget Sid. As much as you can. Do what you want. Go camping with the guys. Do kata with Mr. Miyagi. Hang out with me. Don't waste thoughts on the bastard. Take up space. Where you want to. If you're worried you'll fall into bad habits I'll let you know," Daniel said with a small smirk on his lips. He doubted Johnny ever would and he was pretty sure he'd spoil Johnny if he let him. "You don't have to let Sid scare you out of the Valley. And you do know your Mom loves you unconditionally right? Like I may have only met her like twice but it's obvious how much she cares for you."

Daniel let go and wrapped his arms around Johnny's neck, hugging him. Johnny didn't flinch but he did stiffen. "You're going to be okay. We're not going to leave you alone, you know all the doors are open. Just show up. Give it a try. Any of us. Okay? Before you drive off to some motel."

Daniel thought about it for a second.

"Have you had to do that before?"

"No," Johnny said softly. "I got stronger before I got a car. Before I got a car...I slept on the beach."

Damn it. Daniel wanted to file a complaint. Wanted to storm in that mansion. Kick Sid's ass. But he didn't know what good it would do. Other than make him feel better. And disappoint Mr. Miyagi. But maybe Mr. Miyagi would let this one slide. If it was Sid.

They couldn't leave like this. The mess of painful truths Daniel had pulled out of Johnny. He breathed carefully. He didn't want to pull away. He slid his fingers into Johnny's hair.

"Don't sleep on the beach or in your car next time. Don't go to a motel. Come to my house. Okay?" Daniel whispered. "Stay with me."

His mother would understand. She might not let Daniel keep Johnny in his room, in his bed, since she knew he liked him. But she'd understand and let him crash. Wouldn't bat an eye at that. Maybe if he explained that Johnny didn't sleep super well on his own maybe he could get her to cave.

"Okay," Johnny said softly.

Daniel smiled warmly. He lowered back down. He didn't want to pull away. It was so nice.

"Do you want to try a spin?" Daniel asked pulling away a little.

They were running out of time and he had one more stop he wanted to make before they went back to the hotel. He had to show off a little. Needed Johnny to leave Central Park a little happier.

Daniel skated back a little, made sure no one was around, no one was too close, and watched as Johnny stopped, leaning against the wall, eyes on him, watching. Daniel held out his left arm, his right arm behind himself and he swung, pulling his arms into his chest and spinning then he held out his arms, slowing down and stopping with a big grin on his face.

"Physics," he said warmly. "Centrifugal force. Think you got it? Wanna try?" Daniel asked skating over to Johnny.

Johnny nodded, pushing away from the edge. He repeated the way Daniel had moved, face full of focus. Daniel leaned against the edge, elbows resting on it. Johnny moved the way he had, arms out and then pulling them in, spinning. He looked delighted when he stopped. Smiling warmly because he'd done it. Proud of himself. Just like Daniel was proud of him for trying. Heart pounding because there was that smile again. The smile that Daniel loved. He pushed off from the edge taking Johnny's hands in his.

"Absolutely perfect," Daniel said warmly. "You make everything look so easy. You could probably do anything you want. I'm sure you'd succeed."

Johnny was smiling at him. "Physics would be more fun if you taught it."

"Everything would be more fun if I got to teach it," Daniel said.

Maybe he was working on the support beams. Before Johnny would

know it there'd be a beautiful house around him. And he wouldn't want to leave. Would stay there with Daniel forever. He just had to use the right materials and not cut corners.

Johnny laughed softly. Damn. Bless Tommy and New York. He didn't want to leave. But at least wherever he was going Johnny was coming with.

"Are you going to prom?" Daniel asked, skating along with Johnny.

"Probably," Johnny said thoughtfully. "The guys won't let me skip. What about you? Do you want to come with us?"

"Yes," Daniel said.

It wasn't being asked out to prom, but it was close enough that he'd take it. And it wasn't like being with the ex-cobras was awful. He kind of liked it. There was always something fun happening when they were around. He wondered if they'd have dates.

"I have this powder blue tux that was my dad's. Ma's been holding onto it for me. Said dad thought I could wear it to my prom. She's been waiting for like...ten years."

He couldn't believe it'd been that long. Ten years since his dad died.

"Powder blue huh?" Johnny said an amused look on his face.

"What sort of fancy thing are you planning to wear?" He asked.

"I don't know. I have clothes for special events. I'll pick something out from that part of my closet."

"Nothing new?"

"No. Sid wouldn't go for it."

Daniel wondered why Johnny didn't just buy it himself. He'd paid for Daniel's doctor's appointment. He clearly had funds. Unless Johnny had asked Sid for money to pay for his doctor's appointment. Putting Johnny in debt to his stepfather on his behalf made his stomach churn. *Ask. Don't spiral.*

"Did the money to pay for my knee...did that come from Sid?"

Johnny looked at him startled. "Oh, definitely not. Not really."

Daniel breathed a sigh of relief. They did a couple more laps. A few more spins for the fun of it and then traded their skates back in and gathered up their things. Daniel checked his watch. They had just enough time. He was tired. He would sleep well. He hoped Johnny would too.

They walked out of the park and Johnny didn't even ask where they were going. Trusted Daniel to know where they were going, to lead the way. He liked that. The trust that was there.

He walked down the streets of New York City. He knew where they were. Knew how to get to where he wanted to go. He had been tempted to flag down a yellow taxi for Johnny to get that experience. But after his plea to never ride in Louie's car again he wasn't sure Johnny could handle a New York City cab. Not all cabs were alike. But he couldn't promise Johnny wouldn't have to deal with speeding and intense driving.

He led him down through the brightly lit streets. Talking to him about everything and nothing. He was looking for something special. Something important.

There it was.

He pushed the glass door open. It smelled sweet and delightful. There were booths along the wall and Daniel let go of Johnny's hand so they could sit in the booth, his legs stretching out to press against Johnny's. A habit. A need to touch him. It'd be so much worse now. Since he'd turned and found him gone.

A waitress came over, gave them water, and started to offer menus but Daniel knew the best order by heart and quickly listed it off. She grinned at him and walked off.

"What did you order?" Johnny asked.

"Prepare yourself for the best cheesecake in all of New York City. I got a bunch to sample and some to take back and share. But mostly for us. They make a bunch of different flavors. But we'll sample the best of the best."

Daniel grinned. Now if only he could figure out how to get some good lox in the morning before they flew out then he'd mark the trip off as perfect.

The woman returned quickly setting down a plate full of different

slices. Chocolate, strawberry swirl, original, one with lemon and coconut, a salted caramel, and a brownie one. It was probably too much cheesecake. But after all the skating they'd done, after all the walking. Daniel thought they could get through about half. Especially if they worked together.

She walked away and then came back with a bag with a box in it. Full of the mini ones he'd ordered to take to share. Maybe to squirrel one away to bring his mom and Mr. Miyagi.

Johnny was staring wide-eyed at the tall cheesecakes in front of them.

"Daniel, there's no way we can eat all of this."

"Johnny, we're *champions*, not quitters," Daniel said with a teasing grin picking up his fork. "Start with the classic. Learn what New York is famous for first."

Broken Dreams

Johnny and Daniel were unable to finish all of the cheesecake. It was too much. But it was kind of fun to watch Daniel try. So determined. Like he took offense to not being able to finish five tall slices of cheesecake.

They packed their leftovers up in boxes to go and Johnny grabbed the saltwater taffy Daniel's grandparents had given him. Daniel paid out of the envelope Tommy had given him and then they left.

Daniel took his hand again and walked him back through the busy streets of New York City. Led him on the trains, made sure his tickets worked, sat next to him, talking softly the whole way.

Johnny was tired. But happy. It'd been a good day. He'd gotten to do everything he wanted. And on the train, Daniel kept his hand on Johnny's leg.

He stifled a yawn. He didn't want it to end but he looked forward to seeing California again. But first bed. He wanted to shower and sleep.

They got off at their stop and exited onto the platform. Part of the day was supposed to be a free period, broken into groups. Johnny remembered that from the itinerary. But the groups were supposed to be larger than 2.

"Daniel," he said softly.

"Hmm?"

"Thank you," Johnny said.

"For what?"

"Everything. It's been fun. New York, Newark."

"I thought you didn't like Newark."

"I wanted to know and I got to know. So I liked it."

Daniel looked at him, amused. He leaned in close, arm hooked in his. "You think you could get up a little earlier tomorrow?"

"Depends."

"Bagels and lox for breakfast? There's a little place about a block from the hotel. There," Daniel said pointing.

"*How* early?" Johnny asked.

He wanted to sleep. Thought he could sleep. If Daniel was there. Scaring off his nightmares.

"Our flight is in the afternoon, check out is at 11. Let's ask Tommy when we have to be out of our rooms and then I'll let you know."

"Okay," Johnny said.

They made their way through the hotel doors, a greeting to the doorman, and then straight to the elevator. Johnny yawned again.

"Don't worry, we just check in with Tommy and then you can be off to bed soon sleeping beauty," Daniel said pushing the door for their floor.

He pulled Johnny along by the hand to a door and knocked. The door opened after a while and Daniel let go of Johnny's hand opening the bag he was carrying. Bobby opened the door and looked at the two of them.

"Looks like someone's about to pass out," Bobby said amused. "Glad you two survived."

"Wait is it them?" Tommy asked.

Bobby stepped back and Daniel saw the other ex-cobras sitting around the room, but Tommy was up and moving towards the door.

Tommy dropped his voice low. "If anyone asks, you two were with us at the zoo, the Empire State Building, and Grand Central Station." He picked up a bag that was sitting next to the door and pressed it into Johnny's hands. "Your souvenirs. We got you stuff for those kids you babysit."

"Thank you," Johnny said.

Daniel pulled out a box of the mini cheesecakes and handed them over to Tommy. "For you guys, best cheesecake in the city."

"Seriously?"

"Yes," Daniel said with a smile. He liked that the other guys had come to crowd around the door to see what they'd gotten. He could see that

they had a card game going.

"Ah," Johnny said shifting the bag in his arms. "Do you want some saltwater taffy to try? They're from Daniel's grandparents." He opened the bag to show a large amount of candy.

"Damn, did you go trick or treating in April?" Dutch asked then snagged out a couple of pieces, unwrapped one, and tossed it in his mouth before looking over the mini cheesecakes. The other guys helped themselves and Daniel handed Tommy the envelope with the rest of the money.

"What time are we leaving tomorrow? From the hotel? I want to get bagels and lox before we leave," Daniel said. "There's a place a block down."

"Oh, that's totally doable," Tommy said. "Hmm. We're leaving the hotel at check-out time. 11. So as long as your back before then."

Daniel looked at his watch then at Johnny. "10 okay for you?"

Johnny looked at his watch. It was midnight. That'd be plenty of time to sleep. He just had to pack up his things.

"Okay."

"Do you guys want to come with?" Daniel asked.

"What is it?"

"Breakfast. Bagels and cream cheese and salmon."

"Sure," Bobby said after looking at the guys. "We'll meet you in the lobby. Now Johnny go to bed before you pass out in the hall."

Johnny nodded yawning again. Daniel laughed grabbing his arm and steering him away towards their room, fishing out the key and unlocking the door.

Johnny nearly flopped on the bed to go to sleep without showering, but he was sweaty and gross from skating and he could feel the city on his skin. So he set the bags he'd been given down on the desk, grabbed his clothes out of his suitcase.

"Go ahead," Daniel said. "I can wait."

"Thanks," Johnny said softly and showered fast. He wanted to sleep as

much as he could. But he'd still have to pack. Maybe he'd pack in the morning while Daniel showered.

When he left the room Daniel had already packed. His things were sitting tidily on his bed. He was already in his pajamas, a baggy jersey shirt, and shorts. He looked comfortable.

"I'm setting the alarm for 9:30 okay?" Daniel asked brushing past him, gently touching his arm before dipping into the steamy bathroom.

"Okay," Johnny said. He pulled back the bedding to his bed.

Daniel didn't take long, turning off the lights on his way over. He paused for just a moment looking between the two beds. Johnny had moved towards the wall already, in case Daniel would join him, hoping he would. Daniel took that space without a word, turning off the light, pulling back the blankets, and curling up next to him.

Johnny woke up to the alarm. He'd slept well. The weight and warmth of Daniel helped. No nightmares.

He sat up because Daniel was already up and moving. He got up and dressed while Daniel showered and repacked. Moving the books he'd finished into his suitcase and the books he hadn't into his backpack, putting the saltwater taffy in his backpack and looking over his souvenirs. The stuff the guys had gotten. Plush animals for the kids of animals from the zoo. They'd like it. There were chocolate bars and tea.

A little note on the hotel stationery.

"Thought your mom and you guys might like the chocolates and Mr. Miyagi might like the tea."

Johnny imagined them, in the gift shop trying to figure out what to buy, knowing he had things he wanted to buy and wouldn't be able to in Newark. It warmed his heart. They were perfect. All of it. He started to move it carefully into his backpack. So they wouldn't get crushed if something heavy was set on his suitcase. He zipped up his stuff and looked around. Making sure they'd gotten everything.

Daniel left the bathroom with clouds of steam, drying his hair with a towel, hairdryer in hand.

"All packed?" Daniel asked.

"Yes," Johnny said, slipping past him to finish getting ready and to make sure nothing was left behind in the bathroom.

They took their bags down to the lobby to be watched by the staff behind the desk and to check out early. The guys were waiting. Ready for one last mini-adventure. They followed Daniel and Johnny out of the hotel and down the block to the small shop where they got a big booth and followed Daniel's move, ordering bagels and lox and coffee.

It was nice to sit with them, hear what they'd done the day before. Standing on separate ends of Grand Central Station exploiting the fact there were whisper points and whispering to one another trying to make the other laugh. Wandering the zoo, the animals they got to meet, the view from the Empire State building.

Then they asked what they'd done.

Daniel talked about showing Johnny around Newark. The YMCA where he'd learned karate, visiting his grandparents, having lunch with them, going out to dinner at his favorite place then coming back to New York City, exploring Central Park, ice skating, and getting cheesecake.

"Oh, we saw that the rink was open, no one went though," Tommy said thoughtfully. "Was it fun?"

"It was," Johnny said.

Daniel grinned, arm rising the way it always did that slow movement before it wrapped around the back of his shoulders. "He did some spins. Like a natural. Very impressive."

They looked stunned.

Johnny was about to protest that he knew how to rollerblade, had skated in rinks before in California then realized the shock was because of Daniel's arm.

This wasn't even remotely flirting. Why would that surprise them? They did it all the time.

Oh. Right.

He remembered flinching any time anyone came close to his shoulders or neck. He thought maybe they hadn't noticed. But of course, they'd noticed.

Tommy's hands shot across the table and grabbed his hand in his. He had tears in his eyes. Oh hell.

"Are you feeling better? Healing?"

Bobby smacked his shoulder.

Tommy glared at him.

"I...don't know," Johnny said thoughtfully.

Daniel always moved slow. Maybe because he'd noticed? He could always tell what he was going to do. Plus he slept like that every time they shared a bed, all wrapped up around Johnny and in his space.

"Daniel always telegraphs it."

"Like you do when you fight us," Bobby said with a laugh.

"Huh?"

"When you get pissed at one of us, whenever you'd start a fight, you always telegraphed your moves. As long as Kreese wasn't around," Bobby explained. "Like one of those lions that makes a bigger deal out of everything to let the cubs win a fight, even though they aren't really winning."

They finished breakfast and when they left the shop arms wrapped around him. His eyes widened. Daniel was smiling at him, watching from a distance as the guys came in for a group hug, arms around his shoulders. A hand was on the top of his head, ruffling his hair.

"Okay *okay*, I get it," Johnny huffed.

"No man. We haven't been able to hug you the way we wanted for months," Jimmy said.

"Suck it up," Tommy said. Watery. Trying to sound tougher than he felt. Was he crying again? Really? Over a hug?

"Too damn long," Dutch said. Was he crying too? The hell? It was a hug.

Daniel was grinning now. Like he was pleased with himself. Proud.

His friends were weirdos. All of them. How'd he get stuck with these ones?

Bobby pulled back just ever so slightly and the little group hug and shifted. Bobby reached out and pulled Daniel in.

Daniel looked shocked. Made a little sound of surprise but then settled into the hug looking absolutely delighted.

They were his idiots. He didn't understand them. But they were his.

It was awkwardly too long. Standing on the sidewalk as New Yorkers passed. Blessedly very few looked at them. Daniel said they were used to weird. He supposed a huddled group of crying teens was just a regular old Monday for them. He'd humor them. He didn't have a choice. He couldn't maneuver easily. He was stuck. But they were right. He hadn't noticed. Hadn't noticed that he'd stopped flinching.

That was a relief.

Maybe he'd fall back into old habits again.

But he'd enjoy it for now. Maybe they were right. Maybe it'd been too long. Maybe they'd been more worried than they'd let on. Hiding behind schemes and plans just how worried they were.

Damn. They were *still* crying.

"Guys, I need you to move," Johnny said.

"Why?" Bobby complained.

"You've pinned my arms. I can't hug back," he said.

They shifted and he wrapped his arms around their shoulders.

It had been a while.

He'd been keeping his hands to himself.

Just too used to using them for bad things, for fighting, that he didn't trust himself. But they'd been waiting, hurting, worried. He'd forgotten that they need reassurance sometimes.

One of the kids he babysat asked if he was so strong so he could give

good hugs. He'd thought it was sweet. Better than saying it was like how animals were bright and colorful to ward off predators.

He'd have to hug them more.

Tommy shifted looking at his watch. "Damn, we got to get moving."

They dispersed, pulling away. Dutch's arm stayed wrapped around his shoulders as they walked. Bobby and Tommy were walking ahead of them with Daniel, talking to him.

"We're gonna keep him," Dutch said quietly to Johnny. "Like if it doesn't work out man, if you don't end up dating. We still wanna keep him around. Like unless everything explodes spectacularly awful. Think you're gonna be okay with that?"

Jimmy's arm crossed to his other shoulder as he came up on Johnny's other side. "He means, him and Mr. Miyagi, we wanna fold them into our little family. You know? Their fights are our fights like your fights are ours and ours are yours. Someone gives them shit we show up."

"We wanna keep 'em," Dutch said. "Even if you don't get to date him."

"Yeah," Johnny said. "I agree."

Because he did. He wanted to keep them in his life. All of them.

Dutch sighed warmly next to him. "He's a good one. Fun."

"Plus because of him, we all passed math," Jimmy said. "Which for *some of us* was a feat."

"He means me," Dutch said. "My parents nearly fainted when I brought home my grades. Asked if I cheated. Had to show them how I'd done it."

"We might pass finals too. Which is a relief."

They made their way back to the hotel and Tommy put them to work.

Tommy put a clipboard in Johnny's hand, to check off students as they came down into the lobby.

Gave Daniel something to do, to collect keys and take them to the check-out.

He ran back and forth.

Then they got onto their bus. Tommy had a big bag in his hands that he got from one of the teachers and he walked down the aisle passing out little rolled-up pieces of cloth.

Daniel got a white one and Johnny got a black one.

He unfurled it.

Daniel burst out laughing.

The cliche I heart NY t-shirts.

Tommy sunk down back into the seat in front of them after he was done passing them out.

"Can't leave without everyone getting those," he said.

Johnny shook his head amused, taking off his jacket and pulling the shirt on over his other shirt. "You did this so you wouldn't lose us as a group huh? Just tell staff look for the teens wearing I heart New York t-shirts they're all going back to California."

Tommy grinned at him. "Hey, it was either this or like neon yellow with all our school info on it. And like Senior Field trip 1985 on the back. But I was a little worried about creeps."

Daniel wiggled into the white shirt next to him. "You know, I don't think I ever got one of these before. Even though I lived so close. Just never thought about it."

"I'm glad," Tommy said, looking pleased before sinking back down into his seat.

The way back to California was faster.

The weird paradox of time.

Johnny thought some of it was because he'd slept better the night before. Because everyone was more awake, talking more.

Daniel was talking to Bobby a lot. Swapped seats with him, sitting in the middle so Johnny could stretch out his legs in the aisle.

Johnny started to protest but Daniel just belted himself into the center seat looking at him with that stubborn look he got sometimes. He kept his hand on Johnny's leg for the flight and Johnny still gripped the arms as they took off but was relieved that Daniel's hand wasn't there

to get crushed.

He read for most of the flight back.

He wanted to hear what Bobby and Daniel were talking about but the sound of the engine was too loud. It required too much focus and he kept losing most of it. So he gave up and read.

About halfway through the flight, Daniel shifted, resting his head on Johnny's shoulder and falling asleep. Johnny made sure not to move, trying to be as comfortable as possible, but unsure if his shoulder was comfortable. Shoulders were kind of bony. But Daniel slept easy.

Bobby grinned at him.

He was surprised when they landed in LAX and the sun was still up when they walked out of the airport and to their bus to take back to school.

The time difference was bizarre. Even though they'd been in the air for over 5 hours they'd landed only a couple of hours after their flight left.

At school, parents were waiting.

"Tommy, why couldn't you have set this up so we wouldn't have school tomorrow?" Jimmy complained as he grabbed his stuff and set it aside, taking the clipboard Tommy handed him.

"Cheaper," Tommy said with a sigh. "Hang in there. Teachers promised to be gentle with us tomorrow. Probably expect lots of movies."

"So sleeping at school," Dutch said. "That's nice."

Johnny spotted the old station wagon pull up and gently tapped Daniel's shoulder. "Your mom's here," he said when Daniel looked up at him.

Johnny waved at Mrs. LaRusso who was scanning the crowd.

Her face broke out into a smile and she waved back. Daniel looked to where Johnny had pointed. Saw his mother waving and waved back.

Johnny remembered the chocolate the guys had given him and opened up his bag to pass a bar to Daniel who looked at it surprised then grinned up at him when he turned around.

Daniel grabbed his duffle and threw it over his shoulder, swinging it

around so it was mostly on his back before leaning forward and giving him a hug.

"I'll see you at school tomorrow," he said before pulling away and saying goodbye to the guys, to Ali who was getting into her parent's car who gave him a little wave in return and then taking off towards his mother and her car.

Tommy came over after Daniel had left, throwing an arm around Johnny's shoulder and resting his chin on Johnny's shoulder.

"Did it go well?"

"Yeah."

"Did you have fun?"

"I did."

"I'm glad. Dutch wants to be in charge of prom. As a heads up, he's tamed his plans from what they were. But it should still be fun. Won't tell me what he has planned though. Bobby is going to be a pain about it."

Johnny frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The girls he met at the party all want to come. School said he can only bring one. He's trying to get us each to invite one as our date, but they'll totally just hang out with him," Tommy sighed deeply. "He's a lucky bastard."

Johnny laughed. Tommy sounded so sour. He reached out and patted his shoulder. Left his hand there. He could try to be more like Daniel. More comforting. The way he used to be. Like it was easy. He knew he could never be on the same level as Daniel. But he got so much comfort from him. He might as well share it.

"I'm freeing you early," Tommy said. "Thanks for all your help. I know you want to get to Mr. Miyagi's and get your bonsai. Maybe even drop off those gifts to the kids. Start sharing your souvenirs."

"Really? You'll be okay?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah. I won't let the other guys leave early. It'll be fine. I'm sure you need to escape and get some fresh air. Thank you for all your hard work."

"Thanks for all of *your* work," Johnny said.

Tommy laughed pulling away, hand to his chest. "It's nice to be recognized. Have a good evening Johnny."

Johnny nodded handing back the clipboard and grabbing his stuff heading over to the Avanti. He felt a little bad, it was over. But he was excited to see the faces of the kids, of Mr. Miyagi, his mother. To give out the gifts, to see his bonsai.

He drove to the kid's house early. He knocked on the door. He felt a little awkward. But the kids came running. Like he was Santa or something. Like they were excited to see him.

A total 180 from how surly they'd been when Mr. Miyagi had dropped him off the first time.

Their parents were home and smiled at him as he knelt down to give them their souvenirs and wish them a good rest of the week. He thought maybe as they threw their tiny arms around his shoulders that maybe people, even kids just needed people to listen to them. To try and meet them where they were. To pay attention.

He never would've thought kids would've liked him. Trusted him. But they did. And it gave him hope for the future. Because kids were pure. They weren't warped. They could see the good in people. And maybe they saw some good in him that he hadn't noticed. He'd protect that.

He wished them well, waving goodbye and heading back to his Avanti so he could drive to Mr. Miyagi's.

Tommy was right.

He had been craving a drive in the Avanti.

The feel of the California air on his skin, the wind in his hair, the smell of LA, to be able to watch the palm trees as he drove.

He needed to be cut loose.

He'd liked New York, liked seeing it with Daniel and the guys. But it just made home so much sweeter. Like he could appreciate it more.

It hadn't changed. He liked that.

He made his way to Mr. Miyagi's, parking and digging through his bag for the tea and the little souvenirs he'd gotten. Daniel had given him

cheesecake to give Mr. Miyagi, since he knew Johnny would see him first.

Johnny knocked on the door. Mr. Miyagi called him in and he took off his shoes and walked out to the back porch where Mr. Miyagi sat drinking tea in his garden.

"Good evening Johnny-san," Mr. Miyagi said without turning. Knowing in that way he did.

Probably his footsteps. It's how Johnny usually knew.

"Welcome home."

Johnny smiled softly. He sat down next to Mr. Miyagi.

"Good evening Mr. Miyagi. We got back a little bit ago from New York. Got you some stuff."

"Have good time?"

Johnny nodded. "Daniel showed us a lot. Everyone listened to him. They don't normally, so it was kind of nice to see everyone else listening. He'd make a good teacher I think. The teachers even let him lead the way to where we were going. We went to so many places, and then on Sunday got some free time. So I went with him to Newark. It was interesting. Different. He knew his way around everywhere. Was more...confident. Like as soon as we stepped off the plane. He was ready to go. His grandparents gave me saltwater taffy, do you want some? They gave me way too much."

"Meet Louie?"

"I did. Mr. Miyagi, never ever get in a car with him driving," Johnny said seriously opening the bag with the saltwater taffy and setting it between them.

Mr. Miyagi laughed. "That bad?"

"Awful driver. Thought I was being kidnapped by the mob. I don't know how he got a license," Johnny said. "I'm glad Daniel drives better. That it's not like a family thing. Oh, uh these are from Daniel. His mom picked him up. I think they were going to have dinner or something, so since I'd come by first I wanted to make sure you got them. They're from his favorite cheesecake shop," he said opening the box Daniel had given him for Mr. Miyagi and setting it on the table,

and then getting out the tea. "And this is from the guys," Johnny said.

He couldn't bring himself to say it was from him.

He had a gift for Mr. Miyagi that he'd picked out himself. A mug that looked like it was painted in watercolors, from one of the souvenir shops and set it out on the table next to the tea. "And that's from me."

Mr. Miyagi blinked looking at all the stuff.

"This is too much. Miyagi can't accept."

Johnny shook his head.

"Don't think of it as gifts that are in need of repayment. Think of it as a sentiment. That we missed you. I'm not good at accepting things. Gifts. I always feel like I need to do something to earn it. In return. Because I worked hard and barely got my Avanti. Sid nearly took it back. Same with the bike. But I'm trying to learn to just accept things because there's a sentiment behind them. Like the guys specifically thought of you when they got this tea. Daniel wanted to share the cheesecake, a little piece of New York city with you because you couldn't go with us. And,"

Johnny picked up the mug.

"I saw this in one of the gift shops we went in and it reminded me of the garden. Your garden and it reminded me of you. So I got it for you. You mean a lot to Daniel. Like I know you're his sensei and sometimes sensei's are just people who are running a business. Sometimes they try to mold people into things they shouldn't. Some sensei's have lots of awards and trophies and accolades but they're not good at it. Kreese wasn't a good sensei. But you are a great sensei. Even if teaching wasn't what you planned to do. I think sometimes people find the people they need in their lives. It happens in books all the time. I think Daniel needed someone in his life, someone like you and I think sometimes even the most peaceful life needs a little excitement and chatter and I think Daniel brings that to you. You're friends. Not just sensei and student. And friendship is so important, precious when it's the right people who find their way into your life. Because they're there when you need them. And you, you're there when we need you. It's something I'm grateful for. So please accept," Johnny said softly.

Mr. Miyagi smiled at him and nodded.

Johnny smiled back.

Mr. Miyagi picked up a cup that was sitting on the tray next to him and flipped it over, pouring tea into it and setting it next to Johnny.

They sat and drank quietly in the garden. Johnny is breathing in the clean air.

He told Mr. Miyagi after a while of all the places they went. Mr. Miyagi told him about his trips to New York. It was a quiet conversation. Peaceful.

He pointed out the different flavors of cheesecake, telling him what each flavor was because that's what Daniel had explained. And then as the sun began to set he bid Mr. Miyagi a good evening.

He collecting the rest of his saltwater taffy and the bonsai and heading back to the Avanti.

He got tacos at his favorite restaurant, giving the elderly woman some saltwater taffy. She laughed and gave him ice cream, the coconut ice he loved and he drove to the beach to eat and watch the waves with his bonsai.

When he drove home the light feeling in his heart crashed back down. Sid's car was back. He took all the quiet precautions. Parking the Avanti safely between cars, leaving his gift for his Mom in her office, and then going the backway to his room.

He locked his door, setting the bonsai up high on the shelf and sinking onto his bed with a heavy breath.

All the calm had evaporated on seeing Sid's car. Laying down didn't help. So he got up, practiced kata in his room. Breathing carefully. When his heart didn't pound quite so badly he unpacked.

He showered and went to bed.

He promised everyone he'd sleep. He'd try to sleep more. His door was locked. He'd be fine.

He missed having Daniel next to him. Curled up against him.

Missed the guys. They wouldn't be there that night. They'd be home with their families.

He rolled around a lot, trying to sleep, failing, ears straining for

sounds. He sighed grabbing his walkman and popping a new cassette in and laying back down, listening to the music and closing his eyes again.

It took a while. Too long. But eventually, he drifted off.

His bags were packed and he was standing in the drive. Two tall members of the staff stood on either side of him like bodyguards. But not *for* him. Picked specifically because they were bigger than Johnny.

He wanted to see his mom. But they were pushing him towards a car. A one-way ticket he couldn't read in his hands, but he knew it was far.

He wanted to see his friends. But he was being pushed into the back of a car. His bag was thrown into the trunk. He hadn't gotten to pack it. Had been caught off guard. He didn't know if the things he actually cared for were in there.

He knew the bonsai wasn't there.

He asked the driver if he could at least call his friends, tell him where he was going. But the driver shook his head. Told him to shut up and sit back. The seat belt held him tightly in place.

He tried the doors they wouldn't unlock. He wouldn't get to say goodbye. He wouldn't get to explain what happened. He wanted to know what he'd done. Why he couldn't finish the year with his friends. Why he was being sent away now. What did he do? How could he fix it? He didn't have to be sent away. Where even was he being sent away to?

The driver snapped at him. Wouldn't answer. Just told him to shut up again. Johnny didn't want to go. Not now. Not when he was learning kata with Mr. Miyagi and Daniel. Not when they were less than two months out from graduating. He wanted to be with his friends. He wanted to go with them. After. He pleaded. After he graduated send him away then. Not now. Couldn't he at least have said goodbye to his mom? What were they even going to tell her? Why couldn't he have left with the Avanti?

Somehow he knew the answers. They'd tell her he ran away. Or had gone on a bender and died. It didn't matter just that he was gone and wouldn't be coming back. It'd break her heart. His car would be sold for scraps. Just like the rest of his stuff. To try and make up for the

amount of money wasted to raise him. For the amount of time wasted.

He wasn't welcome back. It didn't matter where he went but he wasn't welcome back in the Valley. Sid would make sure he couldn't come back. There was a threat there. That whoever would be watching was told to use whatever force necessary, to not worry because he was just a kid no one would miss.

He protested. His friends would miss him. Daniel would miss him. His mom would miss him.

He was a burden. It'd be better if he just left. Easier on everyone.

He told the driver no. He wanted to go home. The driver laughed. Home? He didn't have one. It was Sid's house. He just lived there wasting valuable space and resources.

Johnny got quiet.

They were leaving the city.

Sometimes he wanted to leave. But on his own terms. Not like this. Not dragged away. Because if he left he could still come back. But taken away like this with no money in his pockets, no car, no clue what was in that bag. How would he get back to his friends? To Daniel? To his mom or Mr. Miyagi?

He had responsibilities. There were kids that looked to him to show up and keep them safe while their parents were gone, animals that needed him.

He struggled with the door again.

He unhooked his seat belt.

He'd kick. He laid down and started kicking the door. The glass. It didn't budge. He knew that it should've. That the glass should've shattered. He was putting his all into it.

The car stopped and the door opened and he was yanked out by his hair. It was the dessert. He'd planned to go here. Sometimes. He'd wanted to see the stars.

The bag was thrown at him. It was heavy and pointy. It wasn't useful things.

The car drove off. He opened the bag.

It was his trophies, including the broken one. His karate stuff and nothing else. The stuff from the back of his closet that he hadn't looked at in months. That he ignored.

He dropped the bag and sunk to the ground.

Sid must've known.

Abandon him anywhere in LA and he'd find his way home.

But the desert?

He wouldn't figure it out.

He wouldn't make it back.

Give him nothing but broken dreams and he'd die.

Johnny jerked awake, throat dry. He got up and drank some water he had on his desk. His hands were shaking. There was a reason he didn't sleep much.

He sighed.

He took the bonsai down off the shelf and set it on his desk.

He'd bought the tools that Mr. Miyagi had, to trim it and help it grow the way he wanted.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, imagined the bonsai the way he wanted it to look in his mind. The way Mr. Miyagi had told him, then batted his eyes open and went to work.

He kept at it, whispering to the bonsai as he did until the sun came up until he leaned back and studied it. He was pleased. It looked healthy. Strong. He stretched, rolling the cricks out of his neck.

He got ready to go to school, bonsai under his arm, and headed out to the Avanti.

He ran his fingers over the side of the car. Relieved to see it. It'd just been a nightmare, but still. It was a relief.

He left early and drove until it was time to go to school. Time to sit in his classes with the guys, to fall asleep in the darkened classrooms

while the teachers played movies or gave them easy worksheets to do.

To see Daniel.

He needed that.

A little anchor that everything was fine.

What friends are for

Chapter Notes

> We're moving a bit faster. I am changing something again because in the USA prom isn't the last day of school. Graduation is later and I don't think there's any way Lucille would've left right after prom and not watched Daniel graduate. I don't think she would've approved of Daniel dipping after prom and flying to Okinawa instead of graduating either.

Daniel's mother wanted all the details of their trip. Needed to know everywhere they'd gone, was delighted by hearing how the guys had liked everything. Told him his grandparents had called, that they'd liked Johnny.

She smiled a little knowing smile.

She was shocked when he told her about the bouquet Johnny had made for Dad, tears pricking in her eyes, touched.

"I saw my godfathers too," Daniel said after a while.

"Oh, how are they?"

"Good. They said what happened. About Dad," Daniel said. "That Dad asked them to give me the talk on all guy stuff. Including..."

"I know," she said, smiling softly. "That's why you and I only talked about girls. It's what I knew."

"So he knew?" Daniel asked quietly.

"No, but he wondered. Thought maybe. And just in case, he wanted to make sure everything was covered, that all questions were answered because he wouldn't...be able to. And there were things he didn't know that Tristen and Moshe knew. They'd been our friends for...wow," she leaned back thoughtfully, "Since your Dad and I started dating. Like your Dad lived in that apartment complex *before* we started dating, they'd all gone to school together, became neighbors, and then we started dating, when we married, you know? They've always been there. It's why I call them like once a month. They're family. And your dad got worried, wanted to make sure you were aware of everything. Safe and happy. Kind of like how we told you if you were going to try

drugs to do it at home. Why you had your first drink at home."

Daniel leaned back against the couch thinking. His mom was eating the cheesecake, he looked at the clock. Johnny was probably at Mr. Miyagi's. They worked their way through the cheesecakes and he hated to admit it but he liked being home again.

Home had shifted.

It no longer meant Newark only. It now meant California. It meant the tiny apartment he shared with his Mom. It meant Mr. Miyagi's place. And it was nice to come home.

School went by fast.

Johnny fell asleep in their English class when the teacher played the movie. The teacher noticed but didn't say anything.

They'd been allowed to push their desks together. So Daniel had moved his over and shifted focus from the film to watching Johnny, head on his desk breathing gently, sleeping.

It was dark.

He reached out and ran his hand through Johnny's soft hair, took Johnny's hand in his own.

He'd wake him up when class was over.

He'd probably worn Johnny out dragging him all over New York and Newark.

When they had their study group the next week Tommy pulled Daniel aside and pressed a brown bag into his hands. He didn't look at it there. There was something about Tommy's gaze, a warning to not open it yet.

He waited until he got home, to his room.

It smelled like ink when he opened the bag and a teen magazine slipped out. Glossy and bright. He frowned staring at it for a moment. Wondering why Tommy had made it seem like a big deal.

He flipped through it idly, laying down on his stomach on the floor, trying to figure out why until he turned the page and there was Johnny.

The photoshoot.

Tommy's aunt taking photos.

This was it.

This was the finished product of his work.

It hadn't felt like work but fun.

He stared at the first photo then glanced at the text.

They didn't use Johnny's name, gave him another one and there were submitted questions from girls and guys from all over the USA with questions about dating, about working out, about teen life, and some writer wrote out answers as if they were Johnny.

It was kind of funny reading it.

It didn't sound like Johnny.

But the pictures *were* Johnny.

His heart pounded as he studied each one, comparing it to what he remembered.

The sounds Johnny had made when he'd tried to get rid of the knots in his back. He'd have to try that again. He just didn't know how to pull that off. He'd figure it out somehow.

Maybe he'd do what Johnny did. Maybe he'd go to the library and see if they had any books on massage.

He'd have to get his hands a little more purposefully on Johnny, since now the guys knew they could touch his shoulders and neck again, hang around him again.

They were taking advantage of it, making up for lost time and Daniel had mixed feelings about it.

He liked that Johnny was getting comfort, that his friends were expressing themselves, showing they cared.

But Daniel's feelings were just going to get buried under normalcy like always.

He chewed on his bottom lip flipping the page, oh, the one in the ocean, damn.

Tommy's aunt really got his good side.

He sat up, this was bad.

This was going to go somewhere if he didn't stop now.

He closed the magazine.

He picked up the bag. There was something else in it. He upended it. An envelope fell out.

He opened the envelope.

Photos. Photos from the magazine outtakes. Ones they didn't use, but still got printed.

Daniel flipped through them, damn, why couldn't he just have Johnny now?

Why was it fair for him to be so damn beautiful and broken?

He didn't want to push him.

He wanted it to be like how Mr. Miyagi moved slow, making sure not to damage anything. Slowly teaching him, making sure he was ready first. He wanted to do that too. Take it slow, slowly lead Johnny where he wanted him, but these were like catnip. Pure torture.

He flicked through them. Who knew how many other teenagers had that magazine in their hands. And he felt jealousy rise up a little wave. Were there other teens out there who watched Johnny but not Johnny grow up, who had crushes on him but didn't actually know him?

He wanted every issue.

He quickly put the photos back into the envelope. Later. He was getting too pissed. Not actually enjoying it.

He'd come back to it.

He stuck them in a drawer in his desk.

The next time he was at Tommy's he was standing in the kitchen looking in the fridge. They were taking a break. He'd been told to help himself. He'd kind of expected a fancier fridge. Full of fancier things. But it was surprisingly mundane.

He pulled out a cup of yogurt.

"Need a spoon?"

Daniel turned, it was Tommy's aunt.

"Third drawer from the right," she said motioning.

She was setting her bag down on the counter, getting out Tupperware from her bag, and setting it in the sink.

Daniel retrieved the spoon.

"Thanks."

"Daniel right? You helped on the photoshoot?"

"Uh, yes."

She was digging around in her bag. "Tommy got you the magazine and outtakes, right? The photos we didn't use? You should use that in your resume. LA is a place where it helps to know people and say you have experience doing stuff. Here."

She handed over a thick manila envelope and a business card.

"You can tell people you worked on all of them, lie. I'll support it. Use me as a reference if when you graduate you need one. Tommy's always trying to make his resume look good. Works fairly hard on it. It's starting to look pretty impressive. He said you might want some work experience. There's a reference in there too in a sealed envelope. Sometimes they want it sealed. But use it if you need it. I'll have your name on a sticky note on my desk if anyone ever calls."

"Thank you," Daniel said looking down a the envelope.

"Tommy talks about you guys a lot, I'm happy he's got such close friends," she smiled. Then glanced at her watch, cursed. "Hey, could

you tell him I've got another shoot to run to? Dinner's in the fridge."

"Of course."

"Thanks."

Daniel put the envelope under his arm and headed out towards where the guys were.

"Your aunt said she's got a shoot to go to, dinner's in the fridge," Daniel told Tommy, putting the envelope in his bag sinking down in his spot next to Johnny.

"Oh, thank you," Tommy said.

They went back to studying. Daniel wrapped his arm around Johnny's shoulders, that blushing was gone. Damn. It was because the guys were doing it too now that they could.

Days passed.

Daniel forgot about the envelope.

He focused on classes and doing kata with Mr. Miyagi, on trying to figure out how to get close to Johnny in a way that he wasn't used to. He found a book on massage but he couldn't figure out an opening.

"You should try it. Just go for it," Ali said when they met up for coffee.

"What if he says no?"

"He might," she said amused. "But he also might say yes. You won't know until you ask."

"What if he thinks it's weird?"

"Maybe if you explain the tension and the knots and the-" She grabbed his book and pulled it over studying the words. "The healthy benefits of relieving tension." She laughed.

Daniel grabbed his book back. "Hey! I thought it was a good idea."

"It is. You also might put him to sleep."

"That'd also be good," Daniel said softly.

"Just you know, go for the things you want."

He thought about that. Mulled it over on his way home. Dumping his book on his desk.

He sighed.

He opened his desk to get out some paper and saw the manila envelope. He should put that business card and recommendation somewhere nice. So he wouldn't lose them.

He grabbed the magazine, the photos from Tommy and set them out on the desk.

What was he going to do?

He opened the manila envelope and frowned.

He dumped it onto the desk.

Back issues.

You can tell people you worked on all of them.

That's what she meant. She meant to use *all of them* as a portfolio for some future job. As if he'd been helping prep Johnny for photoshoots for years.

He pushed his chair back away from the desk and got up and paced. He wanted to look at them. All of them.

He was nervous.

Like this was something bad. But teens all over got this magazine. Hell, he'd seen it in the store, he'd just never picked it up before.

Now he knew the photographer. Had worked for her. Oh, living in LA was weird.

If he was going to use it as part of his resume he had to know what he'd worked on. If he was going to lie he had to know what he was going to lie about.

He grabbed all the magazines and laid down on his bed. The covers had some famous movie star or tv star or musician on the cover and all sorts of little tidbits, hints about gossip and highlights on them.

He grabbed the oldest one and flicked it open. Searching past ads and things he didn't care about for Johnny. He almost missed it. Almost skipped past it.

It was the Johnny from the photo he'd seen at Jimmy's in the photo he'd kept. Young, before Kreese had sunk his teeth too deep into him.

He looked like a boy next door. Holding books, wearing some school uniform Daniel didn't recognize. He was practicing magic in one, doing a trick, another in a white gi. But his belt was yellow and he was doing a karate pose. It looked like he was having fun, not serious yet.

The questions were all from girls. Asking how to tell if a boy liked you, how to let him know you liked him, what to expect on a date, how to talk to a boy.

He closed it setting it aside. It was so damn wholesome.

He grabbed the next one. Flipped through.

He found Johnny after his growth spurt. Tall, broad-shouldered, muscular, but still young. His features were not the same yet.

They'd slicked back his hair. It looked like they'd gone to a mall, to the movies, all date cliché spots, hiking.

There was one of him hiking hand held back to the viewer as if to help them up.

All the questions were still from girls. Still the same thing.

One of Johnny at a dinner with a fancy milkshake with two straws. Another was where he was tying on roller skates, skating in the next one.

No wonder he'd been okay on the ice.

Only one shot of him in his gi again. Already a brown belt.

He shut it, heart pounding.

He grabbed the next one.

They were all around the same spot in the magazine and he flipped forward, finding Johnny faster this time.

He was working out. The first couple of questions were from guys. Asking about Johnny's workout routine.

Daniel read it over, had to read it again to wrap his mind around it, Tommy hadn't lied. Almost all he could've done was this. Work out and karate. It was intense.

The next photo was of Johnny snowboarding. He looked cool. He looked cool in all of the photos, the wholesome boy next door gone.

They'd clearly switched gears from targeting only a female audience to realizing they had a lot of male readers.

He flicked through, looking at Johnny on the beach surfing. Sitting around on some steps with a guitar.

Daniel frowned.

What was he? A Barbie doll? One with a million different interests and occupations?

Was this real?

He flicked to the next page and found a fold-out poster.

Okay, ridiculous.

He unfolded it.

Johnny was wearing his black tournament gi. But you couldn't see the cobra patch, it was covered with a real snake. A big yellow boa. It was wrapped around him, had wrapped under his gi that was open at the top its tail wrapped around one of Johnny's thighs, but its head was looking at the viewer, held out easily on Johnny's arm.

It looked so heavy across his shoulders.

It was massive.

But Johnny made it look easy.

Like holding a snake was the easiest thing in the world. But that had been when he'd been a cobra. A black belt probably.

Daniel couldn't tear his eyes away. This was the start of the Johnny he'd first met. The start of when he started believing Kreese, following him, believing everything he said.

And it was hot. Scary and hot. Tough guy photo, but the damn snake, the open gi, the muscle. Daniel's mouth went dry.

He was hella confused about the emotions swirling after seeing the photo. Not even a photo. A damn pull-out poster.

He shut the magazine.

Hell. It was hell. Could he even manage through the next one?

He grabbed the next one. They had Johnny practicing against someone else, sparring. Their face wasn't clear. But after a couple of minutes of studying it Daniel realized it had to be Tommy.

That calmed him down a little. As his blood tried to figure out which way to go. It settled.

Johnny had his car now. The Avanti. He leaned against it in his red jacket and black headband. Looked at ease. Another was on his bike.

They'd picked out shirts that were tight. That hugged every muscle.

Daniel had to look away. He looked at his clock with a frown. It was 2 am. He'd been staring at photos of Johnny since 7 pm.

He carefully put the magazine's back in the envelope.

He set it aside. Damn.

Looking at so many photos of Johnny, blue eyes staring back at him, his heart was pounding. Would he have had the same response when he was younger? If he'd grabbed one of those magazines as a joke? He would've thought Johnny was cool. But would he have the problems he was having now?

Or was that because he *knew* Johnny? Because he liked him? Because he knew what he looked like while studying, focused and intense? Because he knew what he sounded like when he was reading aloud to Daniel in the quiet of Mr. Miyagi's garden? Knew the way he moved while practicing kata? Knew the way it felt to sit in the Avanti, to watch him drive it, fingers gliding over the steering wheel, always so more at ease there than almost anywhere else.

Because he knew what those muscles felt like under his hands, the sound Johnny made when he dug into them with his fingers? Because even though it'd been months he still remembered the ghost of their

kiss, added it in his dreams and fantasies to the feel of Johnny's arms around him, the way they'd been on the bike, the time he'd caught him. The way Johnny had clung to him in the closet at Jimmy's.

His godfathers had warned him to be careful with lust. That when you're young it's hard to tell what is lust and what's love. Because everything is all mixed up and shaken up and everything feels so very important. And Daniel knew, knew from the beginning that it'd been lust at first. He could admit that to himself in the quiet of his room. That being caught, of watching Johnny on the roof, in the ocean, it'd all been physical. But like everything else it shifted. It was blooming in that foundation. It wasn't just attraction anymore. Not just curious chemistry or hormones that kept his hand busy.

He cared an awful lot, had for a while before he'd taken stock and realized it. Not just because he wanted to touch Johnny, but because he liked spending time with him, liked learning more, liked his friends, liked who he was when he was with Johnny. Most of the time, sometimes he tripped all over himself and made mistakes, but he liked the way Johnny made him feel. Liked the person Johnny seemed to think he was. Worth listening to. Worth spending time with. Worth wanting to be more like him.

All those daydreams, all those thoughts of a future, of cooking for him. It'd been hints of where his heart was, he just hadn't wanted to think about it. It was a lot. How much he wanted that future. How much he really really meant everything. He wanted Johnny in his life long term, forever.

He turned off the light with a sigh. He was in over his head.

His mother set out his Dad's blue suit for him. It was powder blue. He'd been given a time. Not much else. Just was told to be ready. Dutch told him.

He expected all the guys would have dates. He'd even expected, last minute for Johnny to have someone on his arm. Some girl from school. Despite Ali's promise. Maybe some girl would just find him and snap him up.

His mother took a thousand photos of him in the suit and followed him out to the front. Where the guys were supposed to meet him.

She kept playing with his hair. Tucking it behind his ear, messing with

it. He swatted at her but not hard.

She stopped when they pushed the gate open and saw the guys.

Black suits, waiting. He was going to stick out amongst them for sure.

"Mrs. LaRusso," Bobby said stepping forward. "As thanks for all the food that you keep sending with Daniel for us, we got you flowers."

Daniel nearly laughed, his mom looked so touched as they handed her possibly the biggest bouquet he'd ever seen. They were dorks. But she was happy and that was nice.

She shifted them in her arms, the camera still in her hands. He knew the question bubbling up. The *where were all the girls?* Wasn't prom supposed to be a date thing? He was wondering it himself.

"Bobby had like 12 girls he wanted to invite," Jimmy said with a sigh. "We decided it'd be better *not* to invite them. Apparently, Bobby would feel too bad if they couldn't *all* come."

"But there will be plenty of girls to dance with at the dance," Dutch said, grinning. "Oh, Mrs. LaRusso what time does Daniel have to be home by?"

"Oh, um." She frowned thinking. "2 am?"

"We'll make sure he's home by then," Tommy said.

"Did you get a picture with Daniel?" Johnny asked stepping forward, handheld out for the camera.

"Thank you," she said delightedly.

Daniel wanted to go.

Wanted to get the night going.

Over with.

He'd talked to Ali about it. She didn't think he'd get a chance to dance with Johnny so really it'd just be torture. The only girl that *might* dance was Daniel was Ali. But he wanted to dance with Johnny instead. He didn't want to watch Johnny dance with girls.

But his mother was excited. So he wrapped his arm around her and smiled as Johnny took the picture. The guys filled up the space around

them after one and his mom seemed delighted by it. They'd be over for dinner soon. Daniel wouldn't be able to keep it small dinners with just Johnny. Maybe that'd be okay though.

Dutch ran forward taking the camera from Johnny and pushing Johnny into the group next to Daniel and taking another photo. Then the guys pulled away and it was just Daniel and Johnny and his mother. And then they were in the back of the limo and Johnny was sitting next to him.

"You gonna wear that for graduation too?" Dutch asked after tapping the glass to let the driver know they could go after they'd waved goodbye to his mom.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Johnny said it was your dad's?" Tommy asked.

"It was."

"That's nice."

It wasn't said sarcastically, but warmly. He liked sitting with them in the back of a limo. He never thought he'd get a chance to be in one. It was kind of cliche but fun.

The school was decorated with fake stars and Dutch slammed his hands down on Tommy's shoulders.

"Good job man."

"Thanks," Tommy said smiling, looking around at the decorations with a hint of pride.

They were on time, but Daniel was surprised that so was the rest of their class. It was packed.

He expected people to be late. To filter in through the night.

He tried to remember how the Halloween dance had worked out.

A band was playing on a stage and people were dancing.

It was different than Halloween where he'd hidden behind his costume and got to dance with Ali.

He wouldn't get to dance with who he wanted this time. He was prepared to be miserable.

They didn't get very far into the gymnasium before they dispersed from his side.

All but Dutch who threw an arm around his shoulder.

"Are you still into Ali?" Dutch asked.

Daniel looked at him startled. "No. That's-no-definitely not."

"Okay. Who you votin' for?"

It felt like a complete one-eighty and he stared at Dutch trying to put two and two together.

"Listen, man, I'm not good at playing like a fairy godmother or whatever. But I'm trying to make at least one dream come true tonight and like I had a list of them I was going for and like almost all got vetoed but one."

"I was going to vote for Tommy," Daniel said after a moment. The thought of Dutch as a fairy godmother was hilarious and it took him a moment to get past the image and not burst out laughing.

"Perfect. You do that," Dutch said squeezing his shoulders and dipping into the crowd.

Daniel sighed.

He'd kind of hoped Johnny would stay by his side, but he was out talking to people too. So he wandered over to the ballot box and wrote down Tommy's name, folded it, and dumped it in.

He spotted Ali who smiled at him but didn't come over either.

He wandered over to the refreshments table and had some punch and ate a cupcake.

The music was good. The decorations were nice.

It just wasn't where he wanted to be.

He found a different table and sat down in a chair with his snacks and his drink and played with the confetti on the table.

The band paused for a break and a teacher walked onto the stage.

"Usually there's an order to these things, but we've had a request to change up the schedule."

The other guys came over to where Daniel was and Dutch looked so absolutely excited.

Daniel got up, Dutch did a little drum roll on Daniel's arm bouncing in place. Daniel looked at Bobby who just shook his head amused.

"It looks like it's unanimous as everyone got here early and already cast their votes. So we're going to announce the prom king and queen early."

Johnny was walking across the stage, carrying a piece of paper up to the teacher.

The teacher flicked it open and read.

Bobby wrapped an arm around Daniel's shoulders and leaned against him.

"Prom Queen is Ali Mills," the teacher announced.

"You should know before we all got here, before we were friends, Tommy went to the elementary school and the middle school that was attached to this one. Like ninety percent of the school knows him. Has forever."

"-Tommy-"

"And he's been in love with Ali since preschool. He only talks about it when he's drunk. How they talked about their favorite detective series on like the first day and became like best friends. Were all of elementary school, and most of middle school. But Tommy's aunt and uncle didn't do the country club stuff. Thought it was a waste of money," Bobby said as a crown was placed on Tommy's head.

He looked surprised and touched, happy.

"The poor guy is a planner. He likes everything to be perfect. We didn't know until it was too late. Until we'd already gone with Johnny, supported him to strike first. Tommy didn't stand a chance," Dutch said quietly at his side. "And Tommy's loyal. He picked Johnny over Ali. Suffered quietly, alone. Watching his friend fall in love with the

girl he'd loved for like ever. And her fall for him. Or well, we *thought* she had."

The students were spreading out in a circle and the band was playing a slow song as Ali and Tommy stood across from each other. Tommy held out his hand. Ali laughed and took it, wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

"And then well that exploded and damaged the shit out of Johnny and Tommy couldn't forgive her. His childhood best friend hurt one of his adoptive brothers. It was a mess," Bobby said.

"And then she moved on to you, so fast," Dutch sighed. "A random guy from out of state. It was like salt to a wound."

"So that's why he was so nasty at the tournament," Daniel said softly.

"Yeah, it wasn't really you. Kreese just exasperated everything. Always made it so much worse," Bobby said softly. "Misplaced anger and a lot of pain."

"And then she dumped you for a UCLA guy. He said he's realized that maybe it was for the best, never getting the girl. He saw the results she had on both you and Johnny. But man I couldn't let it go."

"He never can. So he got everyone to come early. So we could get this over with."

"The guy can't graduate without getting a romantic moment with the girl he's loved since he was like five," Dutch said with a sniff. "It's so damn sweet. He's such a sap."

"Says *you*," Bobby said with a laugh. "Mr. Campaigning to get those two as king and queen of prom for like months."

"Listen there was so much shit I wanted to do tonight and y'all clipped my damn wings. So I had to do *this*."

"What about Johnny? Is he going to be okay, with-" Daniel motioned out towards Tommy and Ali slow dancing, talking softly to each other smiling.

"He'll be fine. He knows they're friends. He just doesn't know the long-held feelings there. And it's good for Tommy. Hopefully, it'll help him move on," Dutch said warmly.

Jimmy walked over, stretching. "Damn you really pulled it off."

"*We* pulled it off," Dutch said with a grin. "Just think of what I could accomplish if you didn't always nix my ideas."

"We'd all be in jail if we didn't reel you in," Jimmy said with a frown. "Just because you're good at this from time to time doesn't mean you should let it go to your head."

The song came to an end and Johnny was walking back with Tommy, an arm around his shoulder talking softly with him.

"Alright," Dutch said with a grin. "Time to go boys."

"Go?" Daniel asked.

"You want to stick around?" Dutch asked eyebrow raised.

"Not really," Daniel said.

"Perfect, back to the limo," Dutch said gently pushing on his shoulder.

"Where are you guys going? You just got here," Ali said, following, calling out.

Dutch turned, from where he was herding the guys out. "The only dance worth dancing was done. There's no point sticking around if we can't *all* dance with who we want to, with who we *like*, we're going to do something fun we can actually *all* enjoy huh? Enjoy your night your majesty."

Daniel caught sight of Ali frowning at that, brows furrowed.

Then her eyes widening. "Wait! Dutch! What the hell does that mean? Come back here!"

Dutch just laughed pushing them out and into the hall.

Daniel sat in the back of the limo with the guys.

Tommy looked so happy. So pleased. And Dutch was grinning in response.

They parked and Dutch threw a bag over his shoulder herding them out.

Daniel laughed when he stepped out into the parking lot of Golf 'n

Stuff.

"Really Dutch?" Bobby asked amused.

"Hey man, it was this or Disney, and Jimmy wouldn't let me buy tickets."

"The park closes at 10 pm. It wouldn't be worth the price," Jimmy explained with a frown.

"We'll just have to go this summer," Dutch said amused.

It was fun.

Dressed up for mini-golf, for playing the games in the arcade, exploring the park.

And then Dutch dragged them over to a locker room outside of the water park. Dumping his bag down on the ground.

"I brought towels and swim trunks from the shop. Keep 'em I'm not taking them back," he said with a laugh.

Daniel stared at him wide-eyed. They were going on the slide he'd seen almost a year ago.

"Really?" Daniel asked.

Dutch studied him for a moment then grinned.

"Hell yeah man. Don't tell me I managed to like also grant a wish for you?"

"I wanted to go on those slides the first time I came here. But it never worked out."

Dutch brought his hands down on Daniel's shoulders, looking serious and like a coach about to tell a player to get their head in the game. "Well, tonight's the night."

Daniel took his powder blue tux off very carefully in the locker room, hanging it up in the dry cleaning bag Dutch had given him and changing into swim trunks.

He'd been so bummed at the prom but this, *this* was a million times better.

The slides were delightfully full of rushing water and the splash they made when it spit him out was all the pool fun he'd been promised for the entire trip to California all rolled into one.

And Johnny was in the water with him.

Splashing him back.

Laughing.

Playing games with everyone in the water.

It was everything he'd wanted and just hadn't known.

To just spend time with his friends, with Johnny.

Walking into a Trap

Johnny tried desperately to hold onto every moment, to be present, to not let it slip through his fingers. But before he knew it he was walking across the stage and accepting a diploma case that didn't actually have his diploma in it and graduating with Daniel, because of their last names, right next to each other.

His mother cried. Squeezing his face in her hands, embarrassing him but it wasn't that bad because Mrs. LaRusso was in tears as well and Daniel was whining to his mom as she took photos. They got photos with the guys and just them. Mrs. LaRusso even got a picture of Johnny and his Mom and he tried to remember the last time he'd gotten a picture with her. Hoped he'd get to have a copy.

Sid hadn't come. And Johnny wasn't going home. Bobby had invited him to spend the summer with him, been adamant about it, almost a pain.

"You're coming to stay with us this summer."

No budging. No getting out of it. And with how Sid had been blowing up over the past month there was no good alternative. Sid had been complaining about a summer with a lazy teenager who'd graduated. About Johnny being a leech. About all the things he *should* be doing instead.

Johnny had just quietly packed his bag with clothes, emptied out his emergency fund, grabbed the keys to the Avanti, his Walkman, and bonsai.

He didn't really need much and he was ready to go stay with the Browns.

He assumed he wouldn't spend *all* summer with them. He could go stay at Jimmy's lake house, or Tommy's beach home. But he kissed his mother's cheek and promised he'd be okay, told her he had fun plans with the guys. He assumed he did, even if he didn't know what they were. Since they'd switched over to get him together with Daniel, they stopped telling him things.

Surprises they said.

Johnny wasn't sure if he could handle any more of their surprises.

Mrs. LaRusso gave him a hug, kissed the top of his forehead, and dragged Daniel off to a nice lunch and Johnny got in the Avanti and drove to Mr. Miyagi's.

It was done.

It was over.

He knew he should've felt relieved but he felt untethered.

They'd tried to invite Mr. Miyagi but he said he was busy. It was a little disappointing. But Johnny wanted to talk to him, see him before he went anywhere.

The kids he babysat were off at camp and the animal sanctuary had gotten an influx of middle school and high school student volunteers.

No one needed him.

It was weird.

It felt like the end of everything and he wanted to make sure Mr. Miyagi was still there. Hadn't just up and disappeared like Mary Poppins now that he and Daniel had graduated.

Hadn't disappeared like a summer's dream.

He found Mr. Miyagi carrying lumber from the back of his truck and Johnny hurried out of his car to his side.

"Ah, Johnny-san," Mr. Miyagi said with a smile, letting Johnny help.

"Hi, Mr. Miyagi. What are you doing?" Johnny asked lifting the wood, not caring about his suit.

"Building guest house," Mr. Miyagi said. "Lots to do."

"Can I help?" Johnny asked.

Mr. Miyagi glanced over at the Avanti. Saw Johnny's suitcase in the backseat.

"Johnny-san going on trip?" Mr. Miyagi asked with a frown, showing Johnny where to take the wood.

"I'm going to stay with my friends over the summer. Things at home are a little...well... I graduated," Johnny said.

Mr. Miyagi hmmed with a frown. He had Johnny hold the pieces together as he hammered the nails in, a single swing of his hammer, and the nail would slide right through, it was impressive.

After the basic structure was together. Johnny had taken off his suit jacket and set it aside. Mr. Miyagi showed him how to hammer the wooden parts of the walls and then left to make a call.

Johnny worked for a while in the peaceful quiet of the garden.

He heard the sound of a car approaching. He heard Daniel already talking fast before he was even out of the car, complaining. Working his way into the kitchen, talking with his mouth full, eating something, still complaining.

Johnny didn't catch what.

He was taking a break when he heard them approach.

"-how come every time I have a problem, you have work for me to do?" Daniel asked. He didn't sound happy.

Johnny heard Mr. Miyagi laugh. "Cosmic coincidence."

He felt bad listening so he got up moving out towards the front of the house through the gate while they practiced breathing exercises.

His mom had given him a graduation cake. It was silly he thought, but sweet.

He had wanted to share it.

Bobby wouldn't be interested. Would've taken some but also would've complained about him bringing something sweet into his house that was already overflowing. It was summer so it was probably all citrus and fruit pies, tarts, and cakes and the Browns.

He'd hoped Mr. Miyagi would eat some with him. But now that Daniel was there it'd be the perfect time to share it. He got it out of his car looking at the bouquet his mother had also gotten him.

He was still puzzling over it.

Amaryllis *Pride*

Basil *Good Wishes*

Chamomile *Patience in adversity*

White Chrysanthemum *Truth*

Dill *Powerful against evil*

Edelweiss *courage devotion*

Tansy *declaration of war*

Sunflower *adoration*

It was the weirdest bouquet he'd ever seen. And he didn't understand it. Which was a first.

He always understood his mother through flowers and she always understood him. But the Tansy and the Dill were such strange choices. And white chrysanthemums were kind of funeral flowers. Not always, but mostly.

Was it because school was over?

He didn't know.

There was an underlying message and an overarching one.

The overall one was *I'm proud of you, love you, good job*.

But the underlying one was of danger and warnings and he didn't know what to do with that. How to handle it.

The cake was easier. It just said congratulations on it.

He carried it into the house.

Mr. Miyagi was in the kitchen making iced tea.

"My mom got this for me. I thought we could share it," Johnny said setting it down on the counter.

"Mmm," Mr. Miyagi said with a nod. "Good. Help Daniel-san."

Johnny nodded and headed back outside to where he heard the rhythmic hammering. Daniel was breathing deeply and hammering gently to get each nail steady and then with one sure swing would get the nail all the way through in one go. He really did learn fast.

Johnny picked up his hammer and went to work at his side.

"So, what's wrong?" Johnny asked after a while.

Daniel jumped, like he hadn't seen Johnny, lost in his own world.

"When did you-? How long have you-?"

"I was here before you," Johnny said amused. "I helped put the structure together.

"Today?"

"Yes, with Mr. Miyagi's help."

"Damn the two of you work fast."

"Well with us working we could probably finish it today," Johnny said.

Daniel nodded thoughtfully. He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. His shoulders slumped.

"Ma got a job in Fresno. We move tomorrow."

"Oh," Johnny said feeling a pain shoot through his heart. That was a three to four-hour drive north. Practically in the desert.

"Whole summer spent in Fresno. What even is the point?" Daniel complained. "I graduated and we're moving again already?"

"There are catacombs," Johnny said.

"Huh?"

"In Fresno. There's also sunken gardens and uh it's near Yosemite."

He'd gone once with the guys. A weekend trip. It wasn't *too* far, but it was farther than Johnny expected Daniel to be over the summer. It was like the sand of time he'd tried to hold onto. Daniel was going to disappear into the desert before he got to tell him anything. And what even would be the point?

He felt a little sick.

Daniel sighed, hammering away. "It just sucks."

"Yeah."

After a while Daniel spoke again, calling out to Mr. Miyagi. "What are we making anyway?"

"Guesthouse," Mr. Miyagi said carrying out a tray of green iced tea and slices of cake.

"You expecting company?" Daniel asked amused.

"Ah, refugees," Mr. Miyagi said handing them each a glass of ice tea.

Daniel shook his head fondly mumbling to himself then looking at Mr. Miyagi, "That's great from where?"

Mr. Miyagi grinned. "Fresno and Encino Hills"

Daniel set down his hammer and turned slowly, repeating what he'd heard back to himself. "Wait, Fresno? You mean? Wait, Encino Hills?"

Daniel turned to look at Johnny. Johnny looked back at him equally surprised.

Him? Did Mr. Miyagi mean him? Both of them?

"What happened in the Hills?" Daniel asked.

"Johnny-san all packed in car. Talked to Mother. If want, stay here too."

"Thank you, Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said, breathlessly stunned.

Mr. Miyagi turned to Daniel and smiled softly. "Miyagi talk to Mother last night too."

"And she said I could stay in here?" Daniel asked motioning to the structure they were building.

"If like," Mr. Miyagi said.

Johnny looked at the hammer in his hands. He got to stay. He was *invited* to stay. And Daniel wasn't leaving. He could spend his summer with Mr. Miyagi, helping him out and doing kata with Daniel in the garden. He wouldn't have to worry about being in the way at the Browns or staying by himself at either Tommy or Jimmy's extra homes.

Places where he couldn't be useful.

He wasn't supposed to think like that. He chided himself. Useful wasn't supposed to be the point.

He liked the Browns, but they liked to do family vacations every summer, Bobby and his siblings. He'd be in the way. He wouldn't be able to afford it. He couldn't let them treat him all summer either.

It'd be their last year for it before Bobby went to college he didn't want to be the random extra in the way of their precious family moments.

He could still see the guys. There'd still be time. But this...this was so much better. And he'd be with Daniel.

A mailman dressed in blue walked in with a white envelope decorated in red and blue around the edges. International mail.

He spoke and Daniel responded.

Johnny had never seen Mr. Miyagi get international mail. It had to be Okinawa.

"Okinawa?" Mr. Miyagi asked stepping towards the man with a confused look, taking the envelope from him and reading it.

"Yes, sir. Would you sign here, please?"

Mr. Miyagi looked shocked in a way Johnny had never seen, signing on the clipboard and then walking away looking at the envelope taking glasses out of his pocket to read it better. He walked to the edge of the platform and sat down, opening the envelope and reading it carefully. The mailman left and Daniel walked over carefully sitting down next to Mr. Miyagi.

Johnny sat down his hammer and followed. Whatever was in that envelope. It would change things based on the heavy way Mr. Miyagi had sat down. The way he'd looked so surprised.

He'd left at 18 for who knows what reason. Any part of his past could come up suddenly out of the woodwork and then what?

"What is it?" Daniel asked when he couldn't wait any longer.

"My father, he's very sick."

"Your father? I didn't know he was still alive."

"Do you need to go back to Okinawa?" Johnny asked.

Mr. Miyagi looked around the garden and nodded. "Have to get passport."

"I'll go with you," Daniel said. "Let me just change."

"I'll work on this," Johnny said motioning toward the partially completed guest house with a sinking feeling.

Could they stay there with Mr. Miyagi gone?

Would it mean Daniel was going to Fresno anyway?

Well no matter what it was silly to have a partially finished building. Had to be some sort of code violation.

Mr. Miyagi nodded and Daniel turned, following Mr. Miyagi out of the house and towards the cars to take him to the passport services.

Johnny had a passport.

Left it in his car, in case he decided to go south to Mexico sometime.

He never had, but he liked having the option.

Sid had promised to take him practically everywhere. Especially when he'd been dating his Mom. He'd gotten him a couple of passports, the promise always that they'd go *somewhere*, the three of them. He'd always kind of hoped they would. Kind of hoped they wouldn't.

He had never been at Mr. Miyagi's by himself.

It was so peaceful. Too quiet.

He heard the sound of the car leave and he went to work. Hammering boards in place, moving on from one to the next.

He wanted to get as much done as possible so Mr. Miyagi wouldn't worry. Maybe he could offer to house sit. Water the plants in the garden, get the mail. Stuff like that while Mr. Miyagi was gone.

Maybe he wouldn't.

If Daniel was also there it seemed a moot point. Daniel would do all of that.

Unless his Mom made him go to Fresno.

She probably wouldn't want Johnny alone with Daniel for however long Mr. Miyagi would be gone. He couldn't blame her.

He didn't know if Mr. Miyagi would resend his offer.

Johnny figured it was okay either way.

He'd been looking forward to it for the grand total of ten minutes it'd existed. Dashed apart by tragedy. Mr. Miyagi should visit his dad, should talk to him, help him get better.

Which might mean....oh what if Mr. Miyagi never came back?

The realization that that was even a possibility brought Johnny to a still. He looked around at the garden and the house.

What would even happen to all of it without Mr. Miyagi? What would happen to *him*?

He'd only been learning for two months. He felt like he had years worth of learning to gain from Mr. Miyagi.

But that was selfish. It was his *father*.

Johnny didn't know his. But he'd seen the pain in Daniel whenever he talked about his dad.

The look in Mrs. LaRusso's eyes. An ache that never really went away.

He took a deep breath in and a deep breath out and went back to work.

He finished one wall, then another, completed the pieces Mr. Miyagi had taught him to do, and then sat down on the wooden platform.

He took one of the slices of cake and ate it and drank the green tea, the ice had all long ago melted, but it was still cool.

He wondered what he'd do now.

Back with the Browns, he guessed.

Same as when he'd arrived, he washed his plate and took everything back into the kitchen.

He put the tea in the fridge and the cake he put back into the box. Maybe he'd meet up with the guys and ask them to help him eat it. That way he wasn't bringing a cake to the Browns.

But it could wait. Wait until he was sure Mr. Miyagi was okay. See if he needed anything.

He heard the crunch of the sound of a car on the drive and turned, hurrying out to the front and down the steps. Daniel looked thoughtful and was frowning.

Had they given Mr. Miyagi his passport? Had they not? Or had he too realized there was a chance Mr. Miyagi might not come back? That this could change everything?

"Did you get your passport Mr. Miyagi?" Johnny asked when no one said anything.

It felt like his heart was in a vice. He kept trying to keep calm. But he'd reached the end of the road and it was a cliff. There was no way back, no space to turn around. He hadn't made plans. He didn't know what came next.

"Hai," Mr. Miyagi said.

"He has a next-day flight ticket," Daniel said softly.

Johnny wasn't surprised. But it still stung that it was so soon. Mr. Miyagi set his things down and walked out to the back and they followed.

"You finished the walls," Daniel said in surprise looking at Johnny.

Johnny was still in his suit shirt, sleeves rolled up, he was sure he looked like a mess. Still dressed up from graduation while Daniel had changed out of his blue tux and was dressed casually. He felt like a mess.

"Yeah. I didn't know what he wanted me to do next," Johnny said.

He knew roofing, but he didn't know if Mr. Miyagi wanted something different.

"Very good Johnny-san," Mr. Miyagi said walking around it with a look of appraisal. He turned back and looked at them. "Dinner hmm?"

Mr. Miyagi cooked and Daniel quietly explained to Johnny that Mr.

Miyagi had left home because of a girl. Because the girl was supposed to marry his best friend, an arranged marriage.

Daniel looked uneasy chewing on his thumb thoughtfully, brows furrowed.

They sat around after and Mr. Miyagi showed them pictures of Yukie and Sato while he packed, explaining how he'd challenged their traditions in front of everyone, the whole village, saying he loved Yukie, should get to marry her anyway, against their parent's wishes. He got a faraway look in his eyes and they filled with unshed tears. He cleared his throat.

"Of course, Sato feel disgrace. So, challenge Miyagi to fight to save his honor."

"And you lost?" Daniel asked.

He looked so sad, so concerned. They both did. So upset. This was goodbye. And the conversation and everything was so heavy. Johnny didn't know how to help either of them.

"No. Never fight. Next day, leave Okinawa forever."

Johnny tried to think of what he would've done in Mr. Miyagi's shoes. But he couldn't.

He realized in that situation he was Sato. Bobby would've been the one to run away and not fight him. Out of love for both him and Ali. Thankfully Bobby had never liked Ali.

He wondered if he would've fought Bobby over Ali. If she'd fallen for Bobby instead of Daniel. Bobby knew him too well.

But maybe Sato and Mr. Miyagi knew each other the same way.

Instead, Johnny had fought Daniel.

Marriage hadn't even been official on the table yet just partially planned, permission given to ask.

But Daniel had been a stranger...being a teenager in love was messy no matter where you lived. But to fight your best friend. Johnny would've regretted it. Would've missed Bobby every day. Would've been miserable.

Mr. Miyagi looked miserable.

Daniel was asking about love. Confused as to why Mr. Miyagi left.

Johnny got it though.

When he thought Ali was coming back for Daniel he couldn't sit around and watch it. He'd gone for a jog in New York City to avoid watching it. The pain of watching someone you liked with someone else.

He wondered if he'd challenge some girl for Daniel's heart down the road.

He didn't have the courage.

No wonder the guys were always so pissed at him. They wanted him to be the hero of his own story, wanted him to get the guy and have a happily ever after, they just were reading the wrong novel, he was the villain of his own life.

It was a tragedy, not a romantic drama. He'd accepted that when the florist closed. When he tried to make friends and got beaten up instead.

"Daniel-san, in Okinawa, honor have no time limit."

Johnny frowned. Did that mean-?

Unlike with Johnny's hypotheticals, instead of Sato waiting at the gate like he expected his adult self to do for a Bobby who'd left, full of apologizes and warmth and missing his childhood best friend, that Sato was waiting for Mr. Miyagi to return to fight him? To jump him when he got off the plane on his way to visit his sick father? Mr. Miyagi? The nicest guy Johnny had ever met?

There was injustice in that. It was unfair. After all the pain Mr. Miyagi had been through.

Sato should've come through earlier, if he had the honor of being Mr. Miyagi's best friend he should've been there for Mr. Miyagi's wedding, should've offered condolences and support when Mr. Miyagi lost his wife and son.

Mr. Miyagi was walking into a trap, knowing it was a trap. Knowing that he had no other choice. And he was doing it alone because he always had.

Johnny felt that flicker of anger, the fight he'd managed to quell rise, sending his blood boiling. He *couldn't* go alone. They couldn't let that happen.

Mr. Miyagi wouldn't start the fight. He was too nice. He wouldn't put an end to it either. Because of the way Mr. Miyagi spoke. He still loved his friend. Even if his friend was even more bullheaded than Johnny ever had been.

From Daniel's heartbroken expression Johnny wondered if Daniel had reached the same conclusion.

Daniel got up slowly, talking about helping his mom pack. Mr. Miyagi told him his taxi would come at 6 pm.

Daniel promised to be there and was heading out the door.

"We'll make sure to see you off Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said.

It looked like they wouldn't get to live in the guest house. That Mr. Miyagi wouldn't be coming back. That Daniel was going to Fresno.

Johnny followed Daniel out to his car.

"It's ridiculous," Daniel said when he heard the crunch of Johnny's shoes on the ground. "He can't go by himself."

"I agree."

"But I don't know- I mean I have my college money, I could-"

"Don't," Johnny said.

Daniel whirled. "Johnny, I swear, don't you dare try and stop me from trying."

There was that danger, that anger in his tone, a fight rising up.

"Don't use your college funds," Johnny said softly. "Let me try to get us tickets first okay?"

He didn't have a lot of his emergency funds left, but he could try. He thought he could get tickets. He knew a place that helped book stuff.

Daniel deflated at that, looking at him, searching his face for something before stepping forward and leaning his head against Johnny's chest. "He can't be alone through this. You need people next

to you when this type of shit happens."

He was thinking about his dad.

Johnny gently wrapped his arms around his shoulders. If Daniel was going he was going. He'd figure out how to pay for it. It'd empty out the rest of his funds. But he'd get them there and back. And he'd figure out what to do after that.

"We'll try, see if he's okay with us coming along. Do you have a passport?"

"I don't," Daniel said.

"Then talk to your Mom, pack, and then go straight back to the passport services in the morning. I'll get us tickets tonight. I'll drop them off in the morning so you've got proof of your flight like Mr. Miyagi had and can get a rush on it."

Daniel looked up at him, eyes all glassy. "What if he says no?"

"Then we'll have tried. Which is all we can do," Johnny said.

And he'd waste all of the rest of his money in a heartbeat for Mr. Miyagi and Daniel. He probably wouldn't get it back. But for the chance to make sure they were okay, that Daniel wasn't alone watching Mr. Miyagi go through what he'd been through, the hardest time in his life that wasn't when he'd been terrorized by Johnny, then it'd be worth it.

Daniel nodded and headed to the Ford to leave and go see his mom.

Johnny looked at Mr. Miyagi's house. His bonsai and his suit jacket were still in the garden. His cake, mostly uneaten on the countertop.

He didn't have time.

He got into Avanti and made his way to the travel agent he knew, the one his mom liked. The one that'd give him a good deal he hoped on two economy round trip tickets to Okinawa.

It'd been a lot. Two round-trip tickets. Last minute. But the travel agent knew his mom, listened to the story he told, and nodded, sending the proof of the flight to the passport services so they'd be ready for Daniel when he arrived in the morning with all his

documents, so they knew to make him that passport asap.

He asked the agent if he could borrow the phone to make a few calls.

He called Bobby first.

Bobby answered like he'd expected.

"Johnny where the hell are you? You okay?"

Johnny explained what had happened. How he might be going to Okinawa. He might not be. But he'd booked his tickets, his and Daniel's, and that Mr. Miyagi was going straight into a fight without back up and how he had to try.

"Okinawa? Seriously Johnny? You're following Daniel to Okinawa?"

"I have to."

"*He has to* he says. How long are you gonna be gone?"

"I don't know. I might not even be let on the plane. Mr. Miyagi may say no."

Bobby sighed, that deeply disappointed sigh he had. "Would you have left and gone to Fresno? You know what hold on a second."

Johnny listened as Bobby messed with the phone. Heard a couple of clicks and then the sound of the other guys on the line, coming on one at a time as Bobby added them to the call.

Johnny frowned.

Bobby caught them up that Johnny was ditching them to follow Daniel to Okinawa for the summer.

"That's not exactly-"

"You'd fucking follow Daniel off a cliff wouldn't you?" Dutch asked.

Johnny frowned. "I'll go wherever he goes if he'll let me. As long as I can."

"I knew you had it bad, but damn Johnny," Jimmy said. "This isn't New York. It's a whole other country."

"You don't even speak Japanese," Tommy said.

"Mr. Miyagi is walking into a trap," Johnny said stiffly. "He can't do that alone. And Daniel watched his own dad die, sick and unable to do anything. It's going to hurt him. I can't let them go by themselves. Not when I can do something. I can...I can try and help."

"See?" Bobby said with a sigh. "He was supposed to come to my house and instead he's eloping."

Johnny flushed bright red. "I am not."

"You better not," Dutch said sourly.

"I think it'll be fine," Jimmy said after a while. "I mean why not? You said yourself you might not even get anywhere. You might not even make it on the plane. And if you do...an adventure like that? You shouldn't pass it up."

"Jimmy you traitor," Bobby said.

"Hey," Jimmy said and there was something in his tone that Johnny couldn't place. "Johnny won't be going alone. He'll be with Mr. Miyagi. He'll be fine. And heck I think we've got contacts in Japan. I'll get their info and get it to you Johnny, in case you get into trouble. It might be for the best honestly."

The guys were quiet and Johnny wondered why. Why it'd be for the best. He couldn't place the change or the reason why.

"Johnny," Bobby said after a while. "You call us as soon as you know what's happening. I'll have them put an international calling card with your ticket tomorrow. You let me know ahead of time when you're coming home okay? I want to know what's happening. That you made it there okay. That everything is okay. And heck so we can tell Mrs. LaRusso Daniel's okay."

"Okay," Johnny said. Then he remembered the garden and his bonsai. "Could you guys do me a favor?"

There was a snort of laughter over the phone in response.

"Could you watch over Mr. Miyagi's house if we do get to go? I wanted to...if Daniel was going to Fresno and Mr. Miyagi was gone...I was going to go and water the plants and clean and check the mail. Keep it nice in case...in case he came home. I left my bonsai there. Can you guys check in sometimes? On my bonsai? On Mr. Miyagi's place? Make sure no one breaks in or destroys anything?"

"Sure Johnny."

"Don't party there. Don't break it. Okay? Just keep it nice. Please."

"Of course."

Johnny relaxed his shoulders, relieved. "Thank you."

"Promise us you'll *try* and be careful okay?" Tommy said.

Worry was in his tone. He'd be out of range. Away from them, for the first time in the entire course of their friendship.

"I'll do my best," Johnny said.

He couldn't promise he wouldn't get in trouble. Trouble usually found him.

He exchanged goodbyes and hung up, then called up the LaRusso's.

Mrs. LaRusso answered quickly, her voice tight when she said, "Hello?"

"Hi Mrs. LaRusso, congratulations on the job in Fresno, sorry to call so late. Is Daniel around?"

"Johnny. Thanks. Yeah, he's up still, packing. I'll get him."

Daniel voice came after a moment, "Johnny?"

"I got our tickets for tomorrow, should be the same flight as Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said. "Did your mom say you could go?"

"Yeah," Daniel said, there was relief in his tone but worry was still in there.

"Do you have a pen and pencil? I've got your flight info here, so you can take it to the passport services in the morning. We got it set up so they can emergency rush your passport. They'll have your flight info but you'll need it and some other info to confirm it's you. Our return ticket is open-ended, so we just come home whenever."

"You really did it? Got us tickets? Damn you're amazing Johnny," Daniel said.

Johnny felt his skin get warm. It was nothing. It wasn't special. It was him being selfish, worried. But he was pleased that he'd impressed

Daniel, made him happy, helped him.

It took him a moment to gather himself again enough to focus. Until after Daniel said he had his paper and pen and was ready.

Johnny went through his flight info, the ticket info, and itinerary and had Daniel read it over, confirming.

"Do you want me to come to get you in the morning?" Johnny offered. "To take you to passport services? To wait with you?"

It'd taken Mr. Miyagi and Daniel forever to get through that line. The thought of Daniel there alone, worrying about their flight time and the uncertain future ahead, concerned him.

"Really?" Daniel asked.

"Sure."

"Thank you, Johnny."

"Okay, I'll see you in the morning."

Johnny hung up and hesitated. Should he call his mom? He didn't want to talk to Sid or the staff. It was late. She might not have been awake still. He looked at the clock. He'd ask the guys to tell her. He felt bad. But if he called and Sid answered? That'd be so much worse.

He gathered the information the agent gave him and thanked her. He checked the time.

There was one library he knew still open and he drove out to it.

It stayed open all night for college students working on finals.

He'd gotten a card from them when he was younger and he wandered around through the stacks, gathering up books on Okinawa, maps, cultural information, and travel guides, grabbed a beginner's language book on Japanese.

He picked a corner desk and with some scrap paper they left out for students started studying.

It wasn't easy.

The language had a completely different alphabet. He struggled to follow the guide as he wrote.

They had tapes. He tried a few of those, quietly mouthing the words, repeating after the tape.

It might all be pointless. But he'd try to cram as much in as he could.

He liked the library because of the tall ceilings and the quiet peaceful atmosphere amongst all the books. There were no fights in the library. No bullies. No Kreese, no Sid. But also no friends, no Mr. Miyagi or Daniel. It was a neutral place.

He didn't use it often as a place to spend the night. Afraid that if he did so too often they'd revoke his library card or call the police.

But if he stayed up all night studying? That'd be something different. He'd just look like the college freshman trying to cram for finals.

He breathed, working on his Japanese.

It was unfamiliar and he tripped over a lot. But he kept at it.

He took breaks, flipping through the books on Okinawa, reading.

Then he'd switch back to studying.

It wasn't sticking.

He'd switch back to reading.

He had to be able to help Daniel and Mr. Miyagi and that meant not being absolutely useless in a country he'd never been to. He'd have to be the strong and sturdy one for both of them. He had to learn something. Even if it was just the basics. Even if he sounded ridiculous.

He'd have to be able to ask for help if someone hurt Mr. Miyagi or if he and Daniel were on their own.

When the sun rose he glanced at his watch rubbed his eyes and checked out what he could, putting them into his bag and hoping he wouldn't get too big of a fine if they were in Okinawa longer than a month and he made his way down the steps to his Avanti to go get Daniel.

Daniel looked like he hadn't slept much either when he opened the door to apartment 20. Mrs. LaRusso was up and packing, running around with last-minute errands. She looked frazzled.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, I just start very soon," Mrs. LaRusso said. "Everything's a bit rushed. Thanks for taking him, Johnny. I would but I don't have time."

"Of course Mrs. LaRusso," Johnny said.

"Come in and eat before you two go," Mrs. LaRusso said, rushing off towards the bathroom to grab things that she threw into her suitcase.

Daniel pulled Johnny in by his shirt, frowning as he looked at the fabric in his hands.

Johnny hadn't changed. His rumpled suit shirt from graduation.

"You wanna shower first? Change?" Daniel asked, glancing at the clock. "We've got time."

Johnny hadn't even noticed until that moment. Had forgotten how gross he felt. Too stressed about trying to cram as much Japanese into his head as he could, but it was like pouring water into a strainer. It kept falling out. It wasn't sticking.

He did want to shower. Bad. Now that he noticed. Now that he remembered he'd spent yesterday in the same clothes building part of a guest house that he'd almost got to live in. He was probably disgusting.

"Yeah, if you don't mind," Johnny said.

"You got that bag in the trunk still? I can bring it up." Daniel offered. "And then I'll make us breakfast.

"Thank you," Johnny said and Daniel smiled patting him on the chest. "Ma, Johnny's going to shower before we eat breakfast okay?"

"Okay! Clean towels are in the cabinet Johnny!" she called from her bedroom.

Johnny nodded and dipped past towards the bathroom to shower all the sweat and dirt away. Their shower head was short. Not built for tall people. He had a feeling there'd be a lot of that in his life. When he wasn't at the guys' places or at Sid's. Bending down to make sure he

was getting clean.

There was a lot of stuff in the shower. Lots of little bottles. Like the LaRusso's had some intense regimen. Just the two of them had more than his mother did.

Johnny had four things. He blinked water from his eyes lifting up bottles and reading the tiny print, trying to figure out what was what. It was all unfamiliar. He clicked open bottle caps and sniffed. Floral. Lavender. That'd put him to sleep, he could try and sleep on the plane but not until then. He grabbed another. Citrus. He squinted again. Looking the bottle over until he found body wash on it and went with it.

The door opened.

"Grabbed the same bag as before. Just going to drop it off on the inside of the door," Daniel said.

"Thanks," Johnny responded.

He was half tempted to ask about the bottles. Ask for help. But the door shut.

There was a big bottle in the corner that looked familiar. He picked it up. Shampoo. Okay. That was easier. He sniffed. It smelled like shampoo. A sweet one. That'd be fine. Just as long as he wasn't using any bedtime stuff or calming scents.

He needed to be alert.

It took a while to figure out everything but soon he felt better, cleaner. And he stepped out, wrapping a fluffy towel around himself and digging around in his bag for a change of clothes. Shorts. Okinawa was going to be hot. A white t-shirt. It was going to be a 16-hour flight, with a transfer in Tokyo.

Whatever he picked he'd be wearing for a long time.

He dried his hair a little with the towel and hung it up. Wondered if he should wash it. They didn't have time.

He picked up his bag and stepped out into the LaRusso's apartment.

Daniel glanced at him when he heard the door. He was pouring coffee into mugs, setting out plates of eggs and toast.

"Not much," Daniel said apologetically. "But Ma's in a hurry and so are we."

Johnny didn't know how to tell Daniel that he could've poured him a bowl of cereal and Johnny would've loved it. He sat down at the dining room table and Mrs. LaRusso came out and sat heavily in the chair next to him with a sigh. She smiled at him and patted his hand. "You guys got everything? All packed?"

"Yes, Johnny nodded. Not mentioning that he already had been packed.

"Great."

Daniel set the food out before them and the coffee. Mrs. LaRusso held the mug in both of her hands and breathed it in with a warm sigh.

"Thanks, kiddo," she said with a smile.

"Of course Ma."

Daniel set creamer and sugar out and she added a splash of cream in and a packet of sugar. Johnny added a little bit to his as well, feeling Daniel's eyes on him.

"Be careful okay? In Okinawa. You two listen to Mr. Miyagi alright?" Mrs. LaRusso said looking pointedly at Daniel.

"Ma!" Daniel complained. "We'll be good."

She laughed.

Johnny ate his breakfast, he hadn't realized how hungry he'd been. He hadn't paid attention to a lot of things. Been too focused. Before they left he brushed his teeth and then helped Daniel carry all his bags out to the trunk of the Avanti along with the one Daniel had carried in for him.

He drove Daniel to the passport services when it opened and they stood in line. He couldn't believe there already had been a line.

They moved slowly. Daniel talking quietly about his mother's job in Fresno. How at least Okinawa would be nicer than that. Better to spend his summer on an island then in the middle of the desert. Johnny had to agree. It was slow going, the line. It took forever. But eventually, they got through. They took Daniel's photo and then they

had to wait for the passport to be completed.

Johnny kept an eye on the time. They were going to be late. They wouldn't be able to meet Mr. Miyagi at his house. Daniel's legs were bouncing. He was chewing on his nail watching the clock as well.

"Damnit, he's going to think I bailed on him," Daniel whispered.

"We'll make it in time," Johnny said. "Before they close the gate."

Daniel glanced up at him. "You think so?"

"We gotta," Johnny said.

The man called out Daniel's name and he jumped up, rushing to get the passport and they ran. Ran to the Avanti and Johnny drove fast. As fast as he dared.

He dropped Daniel off with their bags and their passports and tickets so he could go get in line for the two of them and rushed to find a good parking spot for his Avanti.

He pulled up the hood, locked everything, and ran. Ran across the roads back to the international departures at LAX, finding Daniel and hurrying with their stuff to the desk. The agent handed them back their passports and their tickets and an envelope the guys had promised him and they ran with their bags to their gate.

Johnny could see the back of Mr. Miyagi's head. Slowly moving through the gate towards the door, disappearing.

They continued running.

Johnny's heart was pounding in his ears. Daniel was running ahead, sprinting with his boarding pass in one hand and bag in the other.

"Hey, Mr. Miyagi! Wait up! We're coming with you. My mother said it's okay. I mean, if it's okay with you," Daniel said coming to a stop in front of Mr. Miyagi. Full of hope.

Mr. Miyagi held up his boarding pass and the forms he'd need for customs. "Very expensive ticket," he said with a frown.

"Well, no, no, no. Johnny paid. It's all taken care of."

"What about prepare for college?" Mr. Miyagi asked.

"It doesn't matter when I go," Daniel said.

He was desperate Johnny could tell. He'd thought Mr. Miyagi would be delighted immediately upon seeing him. That it'd be smooth sailing. Not this awkward conversation they were having.

"I mean, Mr. Miyagi, you're more important than college. You're more important than anything to me. I mean... When I need you, you're always there for me."

Johnny felt his heart sink. Maybe Mr. Miyagi wouldn't let them come with him. Then what would he do? What would they do? Would he drive Daniel to Fresno so he could be with his mother? Did he have enough gas in the Avanti to get him that far? He didn't think he did.

"Mr. Miyagi, we'd like to be there for you, like you've been there for us. To help, if it's okay with you," Johnny said. "We don't think you should be going through this alone. We'd like to go."

Mr. Miyagi shook his head. Maybe he could tell. That Johnny was prepared to fight on his behalf. That his veins felt like lava. Was trying to stop him from making a mistake.

Prepared to walk into the trap alone to see his father.

To say goodbye to them, possibly forever, awkwardly in the hall leading to the plane.

Daniel was still trying. Trying a different tactic. Trying history. Trying to discuss the chance to learn about Okinawa. And Mr. Miyagi seemed pleased at this, a delighted and amused smile on his face. Daniel held up the book he'd bought on their way over. Smiling at Mr. Miyagi as the stewardess walked past to warn him they were closing the gate. Daniel tried one more plea and Mr. Miyagi smiled handing over the boarding pass to the stewardess and Johnny hurried to get his ready.

They'd been given permission. He was so relieved.

They made their way aboard. Mr. Miyagi's ticket was for the middle seat, 32-B and Daniel sat at the window wanting to see Okinawa when they landed, to watch out the window and Johnny sat at the aisle stretching out his legs, trying to sleep.

Daniel curled up by the window reading facts about Okinawa, trying to find Tomi village on the map. Unable to.

After spending his whole life in California Johnny had now within the space of a few months been on two flights. Had flown to New York City and now he was crossing the ocean over to Okinawa. He almost couldn't believe it. Almost thought it was a dream.

He wondered what Okinawa would be like. All the reading he'd done. All the studying and cramming wouldn't prepare him. Just like it hadn't for New York. Eventually, after some gentle coaxing, Daniel closed his book and tried to go to sleep.

It was uncomfortable in the seats. Loud. But eventually, Johnny fell asleep. Too exhausted to stay awake.

Here if you need me

Daniel wanted to stay awake for every moment of their flight. Wanted to look out and enjoy every passing cloud and the moon in the sky over the ocean. He wanted to see everything there was to see and burn it into his mind.

He couldn't believe they were going, all three of them to Okinawa. He'd get to see where Mr. Miyagi grew up. Might get to see the man who taught Mr. Miyagi karate. His sensei's sensei. Like his sensei grandfather.

He liked that. But he was sick. And that...that was not good.

They might run into Sato and Yukie. Then what?

How would Mr. Miyagi handle that? He'd married and had a kid and lost both of them and then would see his childhood sweetheart with his childhood best friend. The pain in that brought all his excitement to a pause.

Daniel thought about that morning. That morning felt like another year.

Johnny showing up on his doorstep in that dress shirt, the sleeves still rolled up to his elbows from the day before when he'd been helping build the guest house.

Johnny had no care for his clothes. That expensive suit. He wondered if that happened when you were a rich kid. But then again, Johnny hadn't had much before. Had been homeless before Sid.

He had so many questions.

He kept coming back to being so tired from helping his mother pack, from packing himself. Trying to figure out what to pack, what to leave behind when he didn't have a clue how long he'd be gone. And then while he was setting up the coffee maker there'd been that knock at the door and he'd found Johnny.

He knew Johnny was coming to get him. He just hadn't expected him at that moment. And he'd been thrown. Disheveled Johnny was new. Hair messy and sticking up. Shirt wrinkled and unbuttoned. Had he slept in it? Had he not slept at all? Where had he gone? What had he

done?

Mr. Miyagi said the guest house was for them.

What did that even mean?

What was happening in Encino Hills that Johnny also needed a place to crash?

He remembered the feeling of the shirt as he pulled Johnny in. It was high quality. Practically silk. He looked stunning even the next day in the same clothes. But the flight was going to be so damn long. He'd be miserable. But Daniel filed that image away with all the others. Just like had when he'd seen Johnny unbuttoning the cuffs of his shirt and rolling up his sleeves before grabbing the hammer again while they worked on the guest house.

He couldn't believe it had been yesterday. So much had changed.

Yesterday he'd graduated.

Yesterday his mother dropped the bombshell that she got a job in Fresno with an immediate start date and that they were leaving. Even though he'd graduated high school, even though he was 18, like she couldn't trust him alone in the apartment by himself for the summer. And for a moment it felt like his world was ending. He'd be away from everyone he cared about *again*.

Just him and his mother.

He didn't want to be uprooted again.

He wanted to take charge of his life, to stop letting people send him spinning in the wind, grabbing his hand and dragging him along. He wanted to choose his own destiny.

He wanted to go to Okinawa with Mr. Miyagi and he'd been prepared to empty out his savings. Ready to fight anyone who stood in his way, because no matter what happened, no matter what Mr. Miyagi had been there for him and he'd fight to stay by his side. He'd help him through what was bound to be an awful trip home. Painful and harsh in ways Daniel probably couldn't even fathom.

He'd almost fought Johnny. Hadn't listened. Had been too wound up. And then like a prince Johnny had offered a solution that wouldn't empty out his savings. That wouldn't upset Mr. Miyagi or his mother.

Instead, Johnny paid.

Daniel would make it up to him. Would figure it out eventually. He hadn't even asked. He just said he'd come with and Daniel was grateful.

He hadn't wanted to spend his summer without Johnny. It was why Fresno had been so horrible.

He'd argued with his mother about it for an hour after he graduated and Johnny had driven off. And she'd looked at him in that motherly way.

"Have you even told him? Have you even tried?"

Like she'd let him stay behind if he confessed and told Johnny how much he liked him. Like that would be the *one thing* that she'd let him stick around for. That bumming around with the guys wasn't enough. But love, she'd cave for love.

But he wanted to plan it out. If he was going to tell Johnny he wanted it to be sappily romantic. Like so obvious that Johnny couldn't brush it away. Would have to look at Daniel and see him and see all the work he put in and all that he meant. He had to be clear in the clearest possible way and a deadline of "we leave tomorrow" was not enough time. Putting that much pressure on it would crumble everything.

He'd thought he'd be cool about it. Give Johnny time to think it over, to realize how much he might like Daniel in his life, and maybe he'd be willing to give something new a try. Give Daniel a try. But rushing it and saying "I leave tomorrow" had felt like a bad move on all fronts.

And then Mr. Miyagi had the guest house set up. Or started. Ready to put him to work building his own space. A space not just for him but for Johnny too. And the world felt perfect, full of endless possibilities. With Johnny at his side and they'd get there eventually. Eventually, he'd tell Johnny and it'd be nice and perfect and romantic. The most romantic thing he'd done in his life. So romantic that Johnny would fall for him immediately.

He wasn't sure if that's how it worked.

He doubted it.

But he could dream.

And now-now Mr. Miyagi was going through a pain Daniel was intimate with, and he couldn't let that just happen. Now the three of them were together. Daniel would help Mr. Miyagi and pull strength by having Johnny close.

He'd be ready, ready for anything Okinawa threw at him. They'd get through it together. Though he was worried about what Mr. Miyagi had told him. How Sato knew the same karate because Mr. Miyagi wanted Sato to learn with him because he asked for an exception. A true feeling created from friendship only destroyed in the most horrendous way. That a fight in Okinawa meant *to the death*.

Not referee.

If Sato was still pissed about his honor from well over 40 years ago then either he or Mr. Miyagi would die. Which meant he and Johnny might be returning home after two funerals. And that hurt so badly. He wanted to talk to Johnny. But Johnny's eyes were shut just like Mr. Miyagi's and Mr. Miyagi was between them.

He couldn't reach over and hold his hand.

He hated the disconnect, even though he loved Mr. Miyagi like a father.

He hated that they were potentially heading into a situation where he'd have to beg Mr. Miyagi to run away from a fight. Where he might have to fight on Mr. Miyagi's behalf. He'd do that. Kings used to do that right? Send their squire into a battle on their behalf. He'd do it. He'd fight someone to the death for Mr. Miyagi and it'd be an honor.

He didn't think he'd win though. He'd fought tooth and nail against Johnny and barely won. And Johnny had been learning for what, five years or something like that? And whoever Sato picked would've been learning since they were a baby. Or he'd be fighting Sato himself. He curled his fingers against the armrest with a frown.

Maybe everything would be okay. Maybe Sato would let things go. Maybe Mr. Miyagi's father would get better and live to be 200 years old or something. He'd read that the people of Okinawa lived long lives. And then Mr. Miyagi would live to be almost the same age. And he'd get to keep both of them in his life for the entirety of it. And he could just enjoy Okinawa with Johnny and learn about it from Mr. Miyagi.

Oh, but things were *never* that easy. His life was never that easy. They

were walking straight into the open maw of a shark. They'd be eaten alive and they'd know that that's the path they'd chosen.

He slept off and on the flight. Mostly looking out the window thinking. Getting the snacks and drinks when the flight attendants came by.

He was hopped up when they landed. Talking and asking Mr. Miyagi about a million things.

Johnny walking beside them taking it all in but not in the same way he did when they were in New York. Not just enjoying everything. He was walking in a way Daniel hadn't seen in a while. It was almost Cobra Kai Johnny. Shoulders squared back, eyes scanning ahead and around. As if he expected ninjas or something to drop out of the sky and attack them. But Daniel was clinging to the hope that it was water under the bridge.

After all, Mr. Miyagi had *left*. Sato had gotten the girl and the whole damn island. What more could he even want? He'd gotten everything Mr. Miyagi could give.

He hadn't even been able to find the village Mr. Miyagi had mentioned on the map. No matter how many times he tried. He was getting worried. What if it really was an awful terrible trap? What if the village was gone and Mr. Miyagi was walking into a showdown at noon? Death by karate? And Daniel was there to escort him? He couldn't handle it. He wanted to grab Johnny's hand but Mr. Miyagi had found his name on one of the signs outside and was talking to some guy in an open white shirt with a gold necklace who was being all polite and friendly and Mr. Miyagi was introducing them. Chozen.

Maybe things would be okay. Maybe everything would be fine. Then the guy tried to crush his hand and he felt Johnny rather than saw him stepping closer behind him. Making himself large. Looming.

Chozen let go of his hand, eyes raising to Johnny, leaving Daniels and taking him in an amused smile on his lips. "Nice to meet you. I hope your stay is a pleasant one."

Daniel slipped into the backseat.

Johnny nodded, "Thanks." before quickly following Daniel into the car, not shaking Chozen's hand.

Johnny was close suddenly and Daniel breathed in massaging his

hand. He caught a whiff of a familiar shampoo. He'd nearly forgotten. Johnny had showered at his place. Smelled like him. It was dizzying for a moment, almost enough to make him forget that Chozen had tried to crush his hand. Tried to do that stupid macho thing where you squeeze someone else's hand till their hand was sore. It was so stupid. Was it a warning of danger or was it because there was a USA airbase on the island?

As they drove Daniel felt uneasy. Everything Mr. Miyagi asked set off alarm bells. They were apparently going the wrong way. How did they know they were going to be there? Maybe they were going to die. They were being driven off somewhere to be murdered in broad daylight.

Johnny patted his knee a couple of times. A little pat pat pat. Daniel looked at him. Looked at Mr. Miyagi. Both were looking on guard. Mr. Miyagi didn't seem too worried. But Johnny was tense, ready to go. Ready to fight or run Daniel wasn't sure.

They pulled into a dark building and Chozen's whole demeanor changed, ordering them out and calling for his uncle, throwing their bags out onto the ground.

Johnny stood next to him Chozen's uncle came out of a room, wearing sunglasses in the dark. Mr. Miyagi smiled warmly at his old friend. Then that smile fell, crushed by Sato's words and Daniel worried, looking between the two. Would a fight happen *now*? How dare he call Mr. Miyagi a coward. Mr. Miyagi was the bravest person Daniel knew.

He wondered if Johnny would snap. The tension in him was worse than Daniel had ever seen. His hands were in fists at his side. Daniel stepped next to him, letting the back of his hand brush against Johnny's, not taking it, trying to keep him calm. Keep himself calm. He needed to be grounded, knew Johnny probably needed it too.

Sato made his demand. His snide comments that Mr. Miyagi would die a coward and then got into the car they'd just exited and Chozen tossed his book on Okinawa onto the ground and drove off. Mr. Miyagi gathered his bag and walked off. Daniel grabbed his bag and followed, a million questions for him, hearing Johnny follow.

Flagging a taxi had seemed hopeless. But somehow Mr. Miyagi managed it. They'd been taken in the wrong direction from Tomi village which just felt unnecessarily cruel. Mr. Miyagi's father was also

Sato's sensei. For a man all hung up on honor he should've let Mr. Miyagi go straight to see his father, Sato's sensei. He couldn't wrap his mind around it. The cruelty in such a small action. They'd been flying for over 16 hours. Mr. Miyagi had probably hoped to have been home by now, spending time with his father.

Daniel was pissed. He could tell Johnny was.

They made it to Tomi village at night. They dumped their stuff outside and took off their shoes and Mr. Miyagi knocked on a door, greeting a girl their age whose eyes took in Daniel and then flicked up to Johnny, and Daniel felt his heart sink.

He hadn't even thought about it. That Johnny's blonde hair and blue eyes in Okinawa was going to stand out. That his height and muscles would draw the attention of every girl they saw. Kumiko was cute.

She showed them the way to Mr. Miyagi's father and she translated what was said when Mr. Miyagi's father awoke. It was so beautiful, heart-crushing.

Mr. Miyagi and his father talked for a while. Kumiko translated from the doorway for them. He heard his name mentioned, heard Johnny's mentioned and Kumiko glanced at the two of them, taking them in again like she was puzzling a math problem or something.

"What'd he say?" Daniel asked again.

"You're his students...and..." she turned back to the room, listening intently brows furrowed. Mr. Miyagi's father was talking now and the conversation continued. She smiled softly. "You've had a long flight. Let me show you your room."

Daniel frowned but followed, he knew that couldn't haven't been all that had been said but he was too tired to puzzle over it for too long. She got bedding from a closet and unfolded it onto the floor. One big blanket and another on top and two pillows. Daniel stared at it for a moment then stared at Kumiko. The floor. They were going to sleep on the floor.

"It's traditional," Kumiko said looking at him.

"Like Mr. Miyagi's father," Johnny said.

Right. A sick old man was sleeping on the floor. So would they. He wondered if there was a bed in the whole place.

"Yes. Like Miyagi's father," Kumiko said with a smile.

Damnit. Why did Johnny have to be so stunningly beautiful?

"Thank you Kumiko," Johnny said bowing ever so slightly to her. "Is there a phone I could use?"

She smiled and bowed back. "Of course."

Daniel wanted to grumble. He was all tense and upset. She was going to come in and sweep Johnny off his feet before he got a chance to do anything. He wanted to complain about everything. But he wasn't going to. Johnny wasn't.

He sighed walking off to the small bathroom Kumiko had given them directions to and prepared for bed while Johnny followed Kumiko with a card in his hand towards the phone.

When he got back Johnny was unpacking his bag, listening to his Walkman, lips moving along with whatever he was listening to. He paused it when Daniel got back and Johnny left to shower. Daniel pulled back the blanket and laid on the floor looking up at the ceiling, rolling around trying to get comfortable, but too antsy to do so.

He was in Okinawa. In the house, Mr. Miyagi grew up in and he was unhappy. He was on the floor. Johnny was flirting with a girl he'd just met. He lifted his hands and pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes.

Johnny came back before he realized it. Hair wet and turning off the light and slipping into the bedding next to him.

"It's more comfortable than it looks," Johnny said quietly in the dark.

Daniel rolled over to look at him with a frown. There was a cushion to the bottom blanket. Almost like it was a comforter rather than just a regular blanket. It was thicker.

"You're okay with this?" Daniel asked.

"Better than the beach."

It took a moment and then Daniel pushed himself up. "How often?"

Johnny blinked at him in the dim lighting. "Huh?"

"How often do you sleep on the beach? Is that where you slept before

you came to my place? Why didn't you just come to my place?"

"Oh, no I didn't sleep at the beach... yesterday night? Was that yesterday night? I stayed up at the college library. I didn't sleep. I sleep on the beach sometimes if Mom isn't home."

"Why didn't you sleep at home?"

Johnny shifted uncomfortably. "I wanted to study."

"Study what?"

Johnny rolled over getting his Walkman and set it carefully on the bedding between them. He placed the headphones ever so carefully over Daniel's ears and hit play. Daniel was confused for a moment until he heard a woman speaking Japanese.

Hello. *Kon'nichiwa.*

Thank you. *Arigatōgozaimashita.*

Daniel's eyes widened looking at Johnny. He'd been studying Japanese. Cramming for their trip while he'd been sleeping, trying to sleep. He wondered what else Johnny had done at the library.

He pushed the headphones off of his ears.

"I thought...I could be more helpful if something happened, if I could speak a little."

Helpful.

Daniel put his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "Just being here is helpful," Daniel whispered. That anger, that tension, the concern fled.

"I got a bunch of books," Johnny said pulling his backpack over.

It sounded heavy. He remembered trying to help Johnny carry it but Johnny waving him off. He thought it'd been because his precious Walkman was in there. But now, he realized it was because it was full of books.

Johnny set out books on Okinawa, culture, and history and guides to Japanese. There was even a little book on Okinawan.

Daniel picked it up curious.

"Wait, what's this?"

"The local language," Johnny said.

Daniel couldn't read it in the dim light but he frowned. "I thought they spoke Japanese."

"They do, but they also speak Okinawan. Their native language."

"Have you picked any up?"

"It's not sticking. Some of it's gendered." Johnny said with a sigh. "I keep repeating one of them to myself over and over and it's sticking but that's it."

"Which one?"

"The greeting is *haisai*. That's for guys. I think it's sticking because it's easier than all the different ones in Japanese."

"*Haisai*," Daniel repeated gently setting the library book back into the pile.

There was something he'd tried to remind himself, a thread he lost distracted by Johnny's attempts to study and make himself useful and then he caught it, grabbed hold of it, and whirled on Johnny. "You said you sleep on the beach. How often?"

Johnny sighed looking so uncomfortable. "It was before I got the Avanti usually. When things were bad. When Sid was drunk and Mom wasn't around. It was better to just not be around. And I like the beach. Sometimes like a week."

The look on Daniel's face must've said more than he'd managed to figure the words out to express because Johnny continued. "I had a sleeping bag," he said. "I mean I got a sleeping bag eventually. It really wasn't that bad. This is nice okay?"

He was upset that Daniel was prying, wouldn't let it go, was making a big deal of it. Daniel didn't want to let it go. But he was tired.

"Sato is a jerk," Daniel said softly.

"Yeah."

"Who does that?"

"Sato apparently."

"As a previous dog with a bone grudge holder, would you have, if I hadn't won, if you hadn't decided to apologize, if Kreese hadn't- would you've held a grudge for over 40 years?"

Johnny laughed. A snort of a laugh. Like it was the most ridiculous thing. "Only in a different universe. Maybe. How about you?"

Daniel hadn't thought he held grudges. Not like that. Not the way the cobras did. But then he remembered trying to get even every step of the way, sometimes when everything was uneven he tried to make it even when he had the upper hand. He wondered if Johnny hadn't apologized. If he hadn't come around, if he hadn't let Daniel get to know him... oh hell he'd still think Johnny was an utterly evil monster. Would've held onto that belief for forty years. Until he was, oh god, well over fifty.

Hating Johnny for that long sounded exhausting. He'd have had another life. But Johnny, with this level of hurt and pain, without anyone trying to help him? He'd be a mess. And Daniel wouldn't have know. They'd have hate each other, would clash every time they met until something happened. The wound would've festered until they'd both gotten so used to it that they'd never have noticed.

"I'd like to think I wouldn't, but I would," Daniel said softly after a while, laying down again next to Johnny. He didn't want to think about that possibility.

"Forty years is a long time. And for Sato to hold onto that, it's poison."

Johnny made a thoughtful sound. Partially like he agreed, partially like he was thinking about it.

"But Mr. Miyagi's Dad is Sato's sensei too. You'd think there'd be *some* respect there. *Something*, it just..." Daniel didn't know how to say how pissed he was about the whole situation.

Johnny held out his hand. Daniel stared at it then remembered what Johnny had said on the Wonder Wheel at Coney Island and sighed taking his hand.

"It's disrespectful," Johnny said softly.

Daniel didn't know what he'd do if he'd been in Okinawa alone. Didn't want to think about it. He kind of hated that it worked. A calming

breath and Johnny holding his hand.

Was this how it was going to be? He'd just hold his hand out when he was pissed and Johnny would take it and it'd calm him down?

The thought was hilarious. *Hold my hand instead of holding me back when I want to fight.*

"Who'd you call?" Daniel asked.

"Bobby. He's going to tell your Mom you made it here okay."

Daniel hadn't even thought about his mother. He put his other hand on his face. He wasn't focused. He felt like he was being pulled every which way. Battered along.

"It's okay," Johnny said.

Daniel looked at him.

"Focus on what you need to. I'll try and take care of everything else."

Daniel felt like when he'd been punched in the gut. Air gone. But not in a painful way. The urge to kiss Johnny came over like a tidal wave. He lost focus. It scrambled any coherent thoughts he had. He squeezed Johnny's hand gently.

He remembered the panic he'd felt when Mr. Miyagi got his letter when he learned he was leaving and how lost he'd felt and how Johnny had laid out a plan, cleared out a path. Got him here.

Was that him trying to be useful? Helpful? His learning Japanese, or trying, staying up all night in the library was for him and Mr. Miyagi.

To assist? Because he knew? Knew how hard this was to be in Japan worried he might lose Mr. Miyagi but also not wanting him to be alone in the face of tragedy.

He couldn't remember who'd said it, he felt like someone had told him, whispered in his ear how loyal Johnny was to his friends. Maybe it'd been in one of Dutch's long conversations. Something about how Johnny showed up when you needed him if you were his friend and put in the work.

He remembered something about Dutch saying if Johnny had been a girl he'd have married her? Him? Remembered the quiet things the guys said about Johnny.

Was this that? A strong bond of friendship that Johnny would be steady and helpful and supportive when the world felt like it was crumbling beneath your feet? Was it because he was used to navigating through all the awful things life threw at a person? So he could walk that road easily and hold Daniel's hands, guiding him from one safe spot to another?

When Daniel's dad had died, when he was dying he'd felt so alone in the world. His friends had pulled away. Louie had been around, awkwardly trying to cheer him up. But it'd just been him and family, a family that was hurting at the same time. Would his life have been better if he'd found and befriended Johnny earlier?

"Daniel?"

Daniel blinked back tears and let out a shaky breath. "Thanks," he whispered.

"Try to sleep. Wake me up if you can't. If you need something."

Daniel nearly laughed. Johnny was the one who usually didn't sleep. Hadn't he *just* admitted to not sleeping before they'd left? Like he'd stayed up all night studying? But he was so sincere.

"Okay," Daniel said. "Good night."

"Good night."

Daniel breathed deeply, he didn't let go of Johnny's hand and Johnny didn't pull his hand away. He was there. Breathing softly next to him, falling asleep at his side. It'd be okay. Daniel would be there for Mr. Miyagi and Johnny would be there for the both of them. Solid and sturdy. Ready to fight if need be. Ready to help if need be.

He thought Johnny fighting would terrify him. Upset him, but it was comforting in a weird way. To know there was somewhere there prepared to have his back if things went south, which it looked like they might. With the way, Chozen had zeroed in on him straight off the plane.

He had someone to listen and go over the confusing mess they'd found themselves in. Someone to take care of the small details he wasn't thinking of that were actually huge. Like telling his mother he'd made it safely in Okinawa. She'd understand. But it blinded him that he'd forgotten. That it'd slipped his mind.

He glanced over. Johnny was fast asleep. The exhaustion from not sleeping and sleeping fitfully on the flight knocking him out.

Daniel lifted their hands up gently watching Johnny, studying for any change, to see if he'd wake. He was out like a light, a log, whatever, he wasn't going to wake up.

Daniel brought Johnny's hand up to his lips and kissed it ever so gently.

He'd tell him, one day, when this was over. When the ground beneath his feet was sturdy. He'd plan it out and it'd be the most romantic thing he'd ever done in his whole life. And he'd be there for Johnny when he needed him, the way Johnny was there for him now.

He held Johnny's hand gently to his chest, feeling the comforting weight of it.

He'd try to make sure they had some fun on this trip. Some bright spots in between the pain he felt was surely to come. Because Daniel had willingly given up his summer for this. Was prepared to stay as long as need be. It was better than Fresno. But Johnny could've been with the guys. Could've been doing whatever. But he was here. Sacrificing his final summer before his friends went to college. The last time they'd be all free together and in the same place, where their lives were aligned and instead he was in Okinawa with Daniel and Mr. Miyagi.

He brought his other hand to his chest, hugging Johnny's arm.

He'd figure out how to make it up to him.

Some day.

Somehow.

Mirrored

Johnny woke up at 7 am too hot. The blankets were gone, kicked off at some point in the night.

Daniel was hugging Johnny's arm to his chest, having pulled Johnny close in his sleep, curling up against him. Practically spooning again. It was just too damn hot to be close to anyone. He pushed himself back a little hoping just a little distance would help but the air was heavy, humid.

He didn't want to wake Daniel but he needed to extricate himself. Needed to start moving his stiff limbs.

He managed to get part of his hand arm free. He could feel Daniel's pulse beneath his hand, the steady thrum of his heart, like a drum. He moved slow and then his arm was free and he was sitting up next to Daniel.

Maybe he'd get them some water. Something cold with ice. He wondered if they even had that. They were close to a US airbase. You'd think they'd have all sorts of stuff. But Johnny felt like maybe they wouldn't. Had a bad feeling about the airbase, he expected a lot of guys like Kreese to be around.

He got up carefully and quietly pushed the door open, stretching and trying to work out the kinks in his neck and shoulders.

Maybe he could get breakfast going. Make sure they ate. Get the day started.

He found Yukie and stopped.

"Haisai Yukie-san," Johnny tried.

Her eyes went wide and she grinned. "You're Johnny?"

Johnny nodded. Wracking his brains for the Japanese he'd been trying to learn.

"Mizu?" He hoped that was right. Water.

She laughed, delighted in the grey morning light, and nodded. She was holding a basket of laundry to do and set it down gently hooking her arm through Johnny's and leading him through the sprawl of the

house.

"Sleep well?" she asked opening the fridge and pulling out a container of water that she poured into a glass and handed him.

"Yes...arigato."

He frowned wondering if that was right. *Gato* in Spanish was cat. Would the little amount of Spanish he knew get mixed up with the Japanese. But she nodded like she understood.

"Miyagi sensei say you like to help. Want to help make breakfast?" Yukie asked, rolling up her sleeves and tying them up with white strips of fabric.

"Sure, yes," Johnny said setting the water down after a sip.

She smiled at him.

"Make Asa soup and..." she looked at him thoughtfully. "mmm donut?"

"I'm um not a good cook, but I'll help," Johnny said washing his hands and drying them off.

Yukie gathered the ingredients she needed and set them out. She opened up a container and dumped something into a bowl of cold water.

"Asa," she said with a smile.

She handed over a block of tofu to Johnny. She made a chopping motion with her hand. "Small," she said holding her fingers together to show how small while she went to work over a pot with little flakes.

Johnny took the knife and carefully chopped the tofu up into small cubes.

"Hai," she said with a grin taking the tofu and the asa and adding it to the soup, adding a few more things, and then letting it sit.

She cleaned some rice to cook and then turned back to Johnny. She got out flour and baking powder and brown sugar and an egg. She measured everything out and set it out. She pointed at the flour and baking powder "Mix," she said and then pointed at the sifter.

Johnny got that, dumping them together, mixing the powders together, and then setting them over a bowl and sifting until the result

was a mountain of fine powder. He followed her instructions and miming, adding egg and sugar and oil and creating little balls that he placed into the fridge when she told him to.

She was making something else, balancing her time between the two. Watching him make the balls while she made something savory. A type of rice dish with stuff mixed in. Something green and leafy. Vegetables. Some meat. She worked fast, sure of herself in the kitchen. No recipe card in sight.

She tapped him gently and pointed to the kettle. He filled it with water and set it on one of the unused stovetops to let it come to a boil.

"Five," she said motioning towards a cabinet and Johnny got out cups, carefully setting them out. "Tea, for three. Coffee for you and Daniel?"

"Uh, yeah," Johnny said.

He got out the coffee, an instant powder, and carefully spooned some into the bottoms of two of the cups. He got out the green powder she was pointing to and spooned it to the bottom of the other three cups, stopping when she told him to. She handed him a wooden whisk when the kettle whistled and showed him the movement with her wrist, a flick. He went to work, pouring hot water into the cups and whisking the way she'd told him to until it was at foamy, working his way through. Until the tea was a deep green and well mixed.

The coffee he mixed with a spoon, pouring sugar into both of their glasses and a little bit of cream.

Then the oil she'd poured was hot and she tested it with a little flour. "Get the dough," she told him setting a bowl of water down next to the pan. "Wet fingers so it doesn't stick."

Johnny did as she told him and then one by one dumped them in. They floated, bobbing around in the oil, flipping themselves over.

"Sata Andagi," she said with a smile.

"Ah, Johnny-san, good morning," Mr. Miyagi said as he came into the room. "Helping Yukie?"

"Yes, Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said.

Mr. Miyagi smiled at him and talked to Yukie in Japanese. Too fast for

Johnny to even try and pick a word out. He caught nothing, focusing on the donuts with the chopsticks Yukie had given him.

Mr. Miyagi sat down at the table on the floor, on a cushion and Yukie set out his breakfast for him, his tea, smiling that bittersweet smile Johnny had noticed the day before. Full of love and heartbreak. 40 years of unrequited requited love.

It made Johnny's heartache.

What life would Mr. Miyagi have led if he'd done as Daniel had suggested? Taken Yukie and run to Alaska or somewhere else. He couldn't imagine Mr. Miyagi in Alaska, it was too cold. But maybe somewhere else warm. Would Yukie have met the same fate as Mrs. Miyagi? Or would they have gone somewhere else, outrun the war? Would that have meant that Mr. Miyagi's father would've gotten sick with no one to tell Mr. Miyagi because no one would've known where he'd gone?

There might not have been a Mr. Miyagi in the valley. Which meant no one to stop him from hurting Daniel. Would he have still been a cobra then? Would he have brutalized Daniel until he was broken beyond repair? Would he have still been under Kreese's thumb, a mini soldier his entire life?

He wanted to think he wouldn't have. Wanted to hope that he was a better person, even without Mr. Miyagi's gentle interventions. But he didn't trust that he was.

The world would've been a much darker place without Mr. Miyagi, without him in Johnny's life. There'd be no garden. No bonsai waiting for him to return. Just the never-ending ping pong between Sid and Kreese until he warped into a monster with no return, until he broke.

He felt bad, but the course Mr. Miyagi's life took, all the pain and heartbreak, had brought him into Johnny's life, had changed it for the better and it felt selfish to be grateful for it. Because of Mr. Miyagi he was alive, healing, able to spend time with Daniel, and was learning kata.

He owed the man so much.

He'd thought he owed Kreese. Thought he owed Sid. Thought they'd held out hands to him. That Sid had taken him and his mother in from the cold, though LA wasn't cold. But had given them food and shelter and a place to lay their heads.

He'd been so damn grateful that everything Sid said carved its way into his heart. Became a reality. That he was useless. That he was worthless. That he was in the way. That he shouldn't be seen or heard. That it was his fault his mother had struggled. If she hadn't had him then she would've been better off. That he deserved every beating he got. Because people knew. Knew from looking at him how worthless he was.

It seemed like a reality, when no one at school wanted to be around him, that Sid was doing him a favor. Telling him the harsh truths of reality. That way his hand would come down on Johnny's shoulder, all smiles like he was comforting him, like this was just the way of life.

Some people had things that made them useful. Sid had money and power. His mother had her looks. Johnny had nothing.

And Kreese. Kreese had taken that and molded him like clay. If Johnny was nothing Kreese would make him into something. Something powerful. A machine to be reckoned with.

It gave Sid pause. Made him change his tactics. And for a moment when Ali said yes to dating him, he felt like he'd finally found that spot for himself. He could make himself useful, a worthwhile person through her. He could be a doctor's husband. He could smile and charm at her side. Trophy husband sounded silly, but it was all Sid expected of him. The one time Johnny almost hit him, telling him he'd be just like his mother. But Sid had sensed the danger and had backed off that time. Walking away with laughter and booze on his breath.

His mother deserved better. But Johnny didn't know how to help her. Couldn't even help himself. Drowning. Like the time Sid had seen him sitting by the pool and kicked him in. Before he'd learned to swim. Having only learned to stand in the waves. Early on. Sid had crouched at the side of the water.

"Sink or swim, gotta learn yourself."

So he had.

Anytime Sid pointed out a flaw he tried to fix it. Learned how to swim at some free kids swimming classes. Then learned to surf. Then was told he was stupid so he spent all his free time at the library. Was told that it was pathetic he couldn't play music like the other kids in the country club so he learned guitar, the drums, whatever he could. And Sid broke everything he could. Every time Johnny started to get the hang of it.

And now he'd graduated, he didn't think he'd live long enough to do so.

Sid seemed surprised about it as well. Just saying a *huh* when his mother told him that the ceremony was coming up at an awkward dinner.

Johnny plucked the donuts from the oil and set them out on the paper towels Yukie had set out.

Not only had he graduated, he'd made friends. He'd found a new sensei. He'd left California. He'd left the USA.

He was carving his own path. He'd been thrown violently from the one he'd been on but he'd gotten up, dusted himself off, and was going his own way. Away from the path Kreese had set him on, the one Sid expected him to take. The grass was tall on his path. He didn't know where it was going. Couldn't see. He had to figure it out, but it was freeing. He could breathe better. Felt lighter.

Johnny set some of the donuts in a bowl and on the table and Mr. Miyagi smiled at him. Like he was good. Like he wasn't replaceable like Sid and Kreese had told him. Like if he slipped up and fell there wasn't another person waiting in the wings to take his place. That there was enough room for him to be there and maybe Mr. Miyagi was glad he was there. He'd do everything he could to live up to that, to be worthy of Mr. Miyagi's approval.

Mr. Miyagi and Yukie finished eating, talking warmly to one another, and then left. Yukie to work on laundry and Mr. Miyagi to go to the family dojo.

Johnny worked on putting breakfast together for Daniel and himself. Dropping some ice in their coffee in the hopes it'd be a little cooler and then walking his way down towards the room they'd stayed in.

Daniel was up, talking to Yukie who told him where Mr. Miyagi was.

Johnny wondered if he should turn around and take the tray back to the kitchen. It felt silly now. Daniel's eyes met his, then took in the tray and smiled, walking over.

"Mornin'," Daniel said, "What'cha got there?"

"Breakfast," Johnny said. "I was gonna..." It felt weird to explain he'd planned to bring it to Daniel so he didn't have to get up yet. Could

take his time. Give him another moment to breathe before preparing for the day, for whatever was to come. "Where do you want to eat?"

Daniel looked around. They were on a wooden platform that overlooked the garden, like a porch but it connected all the rooms. An outdoor hallway.

He motioned towards the floor and sat down dangling his legs off the edge holding out his arms up towards Johnny, offering to take the tray and place it down between them so Johnny could sit next to him.

"How'd you sleep?" Daniel asked as Johnny took his spot at his side, the tray between them.

"Okay, until I got too hot. You?"

"Took a bit to fall asleep but was completely out until maybe twenty minutes ago," Daniel said picking up the cup of coffee and breathing it in with a sigh and his eyes closed. He was wearing a nice pink shirt that he'd left partially unbuttoned.

Johnny wondered if he should apologize for not being there when he'd awoken. He'd gone to bed telling Daniel he'd be there and then wasn't when he awoke.

"Hey, so what is all of this?" Daniel asked when he batted his eyes open again, sipping his iced coffee.

"Asa soup," Johnny said pointing. "Okinawan donuts, and some rice mix thing that Yukie made. We uh, I honestly don't know."

Daniel studied him for a moment and laughed. "You don't know what any of this is do you?"

"I don't. I haven't a clue what asa is. I don't know what anything in the rice is. I just know the donuts because I made them and it was all familiar things though the sugar was kind of different. She just sort of showed me what to do."

"You made the donuts?" Daniel asked, surprised but seemingly pleasantly so.

"I tried. They kind of do all the work for you. Just roll over so they fry evenly," Johnny said.

It'd been fascinating to watch. As one by one, they'd just slowly roll

over like they were trying to get an even tan. No work from him was needed.

Johnny picked up the bowl he had made for himself of the rice dish and ate while Daniel tried the soup.

"I think," Daniel said thoughtfully. "That asa must be a type of seaweed. It's similar to what Mr. Miyagi makes sometimes."

"Really?" Johnny asked swapping over to the bowl of soup.

He tried it. It really did taste like seaweed. Like the soup Mr. Miyagi made. Which made sense in retrospect. Mr. Miyagi was from Okinawa.

Daniel's brows furrowed as he tried the rice dish, working his way through, puzzled, trying to figure out what the flavors were, rooting around the rice to look at what had been added to it.

"There are vegetables and meat, I can tell what some of them are, but there's something else that I just can't place."

Johnny looked at him amused. "You're actually stumped?"

"I am."

"Unbelievable. Never thought I'd live to see the day where Daniel LaRusso was at a loss when it came to food."

Daniel's lips quirked into an amused smile. "It's gotta be something I've never had before. You'll see. We'll ask Mr. MIyagi and then I'll know it, I'll never lose it again."

"This might happen a lot, Dorothy. We're not in Kansas anymore."

"Clearly, Toto," Daniel said with a laugh. He popped one of the donuts in his mouth and looked at Johnny surprised. "Huh, not what I was expecting."

Johnny frowned grabbing one to try it. It was good, crunchy on the outside, and like a sweet bread on the inside.

"It's good," Daniel said quickly. "It's just not what I think of when I think donut."

"Yukie called it something else....um...hold on...what was it? Sata Andagi," he said.

Daniel nodded, thoughtful and quiet. Normally Johnny panicked when he got quiet. Worried. But this. *All of this* was so much that Johnny understood.

They finished their breakfast and he took it to clean up promising to meet Daniel and Mr. Miyagi in the dojo.

He arrived in the dojo in time to hear Mr. Miyagi's rules of the dojo. *For defense only. Rule #2, learn rule #1.*

He laughed, softly. So simple. It fit well with Mr. Miyagi. The opposite of Kreese's. All about striking and fighting. But Mr. Miyagi's wasn't a fighting karate. Defense and calming. He showed them a little toy and then promised to show them around the town.

It was so different from anywhere Johnny had ever been. Everyone was working outside. Going about their lives all so close together.

He paused outside of the Shinto shrine listening to Mr. Miyagi chuckle as he talked about the man playing an instrument Johnny had never seen before, sitting on the steps, children sitting around watching him.

He smiled at them, calling out a greeting.

They watched Kumiko teach other kids an o-bon dance that Daniel explained from his readings. Johnny had run into it too. He watched the steps. The way they were all holding hands and moving. A simple routine.

And then she was looking over and smiling at them, at Daniel.

Oh.

A black car arrived and Chozen stepped out looking pleased as punch, a predator, ready for a fight, itching for one as Sato followed. As Sato laid out his challenge and Mr. Miyagi batted it away. Until cries echo through the streets. Cries for Mr Miyagi. Cries from Yukie, running after them, breathless taking both men in, pleading for them to come with her and like that they're all running back, Kumiko in tow back to the house, like this was it. The end, like they had to beat out the clock before the last bits of sand fell loose and free.

Johnny watched as the elderly Miyagi took Mr. Miyagi's hand and Sato's and brought them together over him, a final request. So clear,

so loud that Johnny felt almost like his ears were ringing. But when he died Sato yanked his hand away and Johnny frowned, what Sato was saying didn't match with his actions.

His respect for his teacher didn't outweigh his honor. His honor seemed to be the only thing he cared about. The only thing that mattered to him.

Johnny couldn't figure it out and Yukie started sobbing and the sound was heart-wrenching.

Johnny looked at Daniel who looked thrown, lost, in so much pain and struggling to stay tall.

Mr. Miyagi's head was bowed as Sato brushed past them all.

Johnny reached out to Daniel, taking his hand in his.

He remembered what Daniel had said.

He'd been holding his Dad's hand when he died. The way Mr. Miyagi had been. Holding his hand and Sato's.

He wanted to reach out and pull Daniel into his arms. But he knew Daniel was trying to figure out how to comfort Mr. Miyagi. So he just held his hand and waited. Waited to be told what to do. To see what he could do. How to help.

Yukie would probably need help. They'd have a funeral. Some sort of ceremony.

He remembered when Sid's dad died. Wearing black, people trying to give him comfort and how it pissed Sid off more. Because it was supposed to be about Sid. Not about Johnny. Johnny and his step-grandfather didn't have a relationship. But people assumed because Sid had kept up appearances. Made it seem to anyone looking in that Johnny was a part of his family, even though he wasn't.

He'd gotten a black eye and a busted lip when no one was looking. Had thought he'd still make it to Ali's. But there was no hiding his face. The amount of alcohol Sid was drinking had spelled so much danger that Johnny fled.

Sid had started breaking his own shit. He *never* broke his own shit. Priceless vases shattered. Priceless paintings were ripped up. The air was heavy and thick. He ran away before that storm found him again.

Before it struck like lightning.

His mother had been with Sid's mother, helping her through it all and that left Sid without any control. No restraint. And Johnny wondered if his mother had been home if it'd have been worse. Or better. If he'd have been safer.

They slowly filtered out of the room to give Mr. Miyagi the space he needed and Johnny pulled Daniel into his arms without a thought, once they were out of sight.

There was a tremor in there. Tears on his shirt. Daniel was quiet, hiding his face.

Johnny rubbed his back.

"It's okay, cry all you need. I'll be here as long as you need, as long as you wantm" Johnny said softly, whispering.

Life was unfair. Johnny knew this. Had known this for so long.

He was thinking that if Sato hadn't been such a dick that Mr. Miyagi could've had more time with his father. Could've spent more time with him. He'd had less than 24 hours to be with his father to try and cover 40 years of missing one another, of separation but love. To catch up and heal all the pain. And they would've had more time if Sato hadn't played his games. If Sato hadn't been a dick from the start about his honor. If he'd reached out at some point in the long years and said hey it's fine, come home sensei/your dad misses you. But he was stubborn.

Johnny knew stubborn. But he liked to think the him that existed now wouldn't go that far. Would always know some things were off-limits. That he had his own code that'd stop him from making such horrible mistakes. From being to blind to see it.

He was so angry on Mr. Miyagi's behalf, at how stubborn Sato was being.

He didn't understand how Daniel was holding up, what was holding him together.

When he gathered himself enough, pulled himself back together from where he was coming apart, Daniel pulled away.

Kumiko told them of the plan. To dress nicely in black or white and to

pay their respects by the river.

Daniel dug around in his bag in their room frantically trying to find something nice ranting that he hadn't packed for this. He hadn't thought. He'd hoped that it wouldn't happen. And all he had was a white button-up and black pants.

Johnny put his hand on Daniel's shoulder.

"That'll be fine. I'm sure," Johnny whispered.

Daniel leaned back against him hands coming up to his eyes again.

"I don't have the right shoes. Just brown ones. It doesn't fit. It doesn't match."

"The important thing is that you're there," Johnny said.

Daniel looked up at him, those glassy brown eyes full of tears. "Really?"

"Yeah. As long as your by Mr. Miyagi, that's what's important."

Johnny hadn't packed a suit either. But he'd packed a black button-up. Black pants. His shoes weren't much better. But it'd be fine. He just had to be there. For the both of them. They changed and walked to the river carrying lanterns. Daniel walked with his shoulders back and head held up, but watching Mr. Miyagi, ready to be there if he needed.

Sato was with them and Johnny wanted to yell at him. To ask why? Why was he showing respect if he didn't care enough to uphold that final request? The casual cruelty of it all made his blood boil.

The sky was heavy with rain. With storms in the air and Johnny just wanted it to rain. Wanted to stand in the rain, let it pummel him. Maybe it'd relieve some of the tension in the air. The pain. He stood behind Daniel and Daniel would lean back against him as they waited by the river, as people placed their lanterns in the water, watching them float downstream, bobbing in the water.

They trudged home quietly and it waited until they got home to rain.

Johnny stood out in it.

Long after Daniel and the others had gone inside to have tea.

He stood amongst the bonsai and breathed, practicing kata in the rain.

Daniel had said he was okay. Had patted him on the chest walking after Mr. Miyagi and Yukie, to sit with them and listen, to be there.

Johnny felt like he was in the way. It was better to be outside. Close but not in the way.

He breathed in and out, practicing the movements Mr. Miyagi had taught him. He needed to calm down. It wasn't about him. The whole trip was about Mr. Miyagi. And in turn on a smaller note Daniel. Because it pissed him off didn't mean he needed to act. He had to get himself under control before he lost it, socked Sato in the face, and ruined everything.

Disappointed Mr. Miyagi, scared off Daniel.

A tiger can't change his stripes Ali said in his head.

But he wanted to desperately.

He wanted to show that when things got rough he didn't immediately fall back on Cobra Kai.

He stepped through the grass and mud, not caring for his shoes. Not caring for the silk shirt. All of it was bought with Sid's money and if it was ruined so be it. He didn't care. Nothing Sid gave him was worth anything.

The Avanti he'd worked for. Hard. He'd worked in his free time at the country club running around for people to get their golf balls, lugging stupid golf clubs across the green. A job Sid thought was useful for a couple of summers as part-time because it made *him* look good. Like he was teaching Johnny self-sufficiency and self-reliance.

It was his, he'd picked it out himself. His Mom had gone with him to get it, hand on his shoulder, so happy and bright, helping supply the rest of the cash. Sid's money, but *not* his money. A gift from Sid but not really. He claimed it was his gift. But it was all his Mom.

Everything else, Johnny didn't care. The fancy clothes, the fancy shoes, it was all for show. It was all just a costume Johnny wore, for a role he'd been cast in that he'd never asked for. Never wanted.

A fake prince in a fake castle, playing pretend. A show for the rest of the world that everything was good and nice and perfect and that

sometimes Cinderella gets the prince and gets to live happily ever after, unless she has a son. Then suddenly it's all different and fractured and fairy tales aren't real and the boy is just lost and twisted up and forced to bend into cookie cutters not meant for him. Like the stepsisters in the original story trying to marry the prince with their bloody feet because they'd been told to alter themselves to continue the façade until it was obvious to everyone that it was a lie.

Stupid Altar of Honor

Daniel listened to Mr. Miyagi and Yukie talk, sitting with Kumiko. He tried to think of ways he could help. Ways to help ease that pain. But he didn't know what to say. He was too stunned still. So he listened until Kumiko tapped him with a soft whisper that they should let the two of them talk alone. They walked along the wooden boards as it rained. In quiet silence, unsure what to say.

Kumiko hovered at the edge of his room looking in for a moment uncomfortable before she noticed the books Johnny and Daniel had brought and it broke whatever kept her at the doorway. She sat on the floor next to the books flipping through them. Daniel followed taking a seat.

"Ah! They have photos of the O-bon festival!" she said, a smile breaking out in delight. She picked it up to show him, before bowing her head flipping through the other pages, from one to another, studying them curiously. Then she set the book down and looked around at the other books. Something caught her eye and she lunged forward grabbing it out of Daniel's bag.

"We don't have this one," she said.

Daniel caught on too slow what she'd grabbed, the magazine he'd packed. He tried to reach for it.

"Kumiko, it's not that interesting, really," Daniel said feeling himself redden.

His heart pounding in his chest. If she opened it he was screwed. He didn't have a good excuse.

She laughed holding it out of reach, turning to look at it closer.

"Wow, it looks old. Not interesting?" she asked studying him amused.

Johnny could be anywhere, be back any second. He didn't want him to find out.

She opened it and it fell on the page it always did because it was the page that Daniel always opened it to.

Kumiko's eyes widened looking up at Daniel in surprise. "Miyagi sensei didn't say Johnny was famous." Her voice was hushed, shocked.

"That's not, it's not like that," Daniel whispered, voice tight. "He just models for it."

He realized belatedly he should've passed it off as if it was Johnny's as if that was *his* bag and not Daniel's. He couldn't believe this was happening.

Kumiko turned the page and she turned bright red. Johnny shirtless, flexing, all muscle. She flipped past it in a hurry with a little shocked sound. "I didn't know they printed this sort of thing," she breathed. Then she let out an awkward laugh. "Maybe it's why I haven't seen it before."

She looked down at the page, one of the ones past Johnny's photos. She looked up at Daniel. "The other pages look new," she said then flicked back to where the magazine opened. "Favorite page?" she asked.

Daniel felt himself turn bright red. He didn't have a good excuse. He thought if he used it for a portfolio like Tommy's mother said, he'd say it was because it was partially his work. But it sounded flimsy. It'd sound worse based on how Kumiko was looking at him. If he said he was the one that made Johnny look like that he wondered if she'd even believe him. Believe that he was the reason Johnny glistened in one photo, why he was dripping in another. Why his hair was laying that exact way.

He didn't know why he'd even brought the magazine. Before he left it'd been chaos. Absolute madness with his mother trying to pack for work and him trying to pack for Okinawa, unsure of how long they'd be gone. A couple of days? The whole summer? They kept tripping over one another. A flurry of movement and panic.

Did they get everything?

Which one of them needed a passport? What was needed for a passport?

Did his mother have her license? All the info she needed for her new job?

Did he need food?

What were they going to do with all the eggs in the fridge with both of them gone? The milk?

What did one pack to go with their sensei home, to stand by his side while he tried to spend time with his sick father?

He'd hoped everything would be okay. That it wouldn't be the same as what had happened to him.

He'd never been out of the country before. He'd grabbed the magazine because it was...well it felt silly after he'd gotten to Okinawa with the actual Johnny.

Kumiko looked closer at the page, the blush on her face receding. Reading the text. "Why does this say Johnny's name is Ken?"

"I think it's a joke," Daniel said. "Like the doll, Barbie? Who does everything, like she's an astronaut and a vet and a teacher and what not? Well her boyfriend is Ken and like they have Johnny playing like all these different parts, like in the past issues he's a surfer and playing guitar and skating and doing karate and all this other stuff."

Oh, he should've shut up. He shouldn't have said that. Shouldn't have mentioned the back issues. That he'd seen them. He sounded like a creep.

"Er, I think that's what they're going for but I don't have a confirmation on that yet."

She studied his face. "You like him?"

Daniel blushed darkly.

Oh god, what if Johnny was nearby? Where the hell was he? What was he doing? He didn't want Johnny to find out this way.

His heart pounded in his ears. He wondered if someone could faint just from someone reading you like an open book, so clearly that you couldn't hide.

Kumiko tapped the page with her finger. "Pretty, handsome, tall, strong, quiet. *Popular type.*"

She made it sound so simple.

His mouth had gone dry. He was going to die of embarrassment. Why did he hate himself so much? Why'd he bring the magazine with him? *Of course* he got caught.

"Have you told him yet?" Kumiko asked, peaking carefully at one of

the other pages, blushing, and closing it again.

"No. Listen Kumiko, I will, eventually, but right now." He took a deep shaky breath. "Right now Mr. Miyagi's the most important thing. If he needs anything I want to be focused. And I don't think right now's a good time to tell him."

He tried to be serious to get his point across.

Kumiko nodded, clearly getting the severity of it.

"Daniel, you know, O-bon quite romantic. We'll have it soon. If you're still here. You get to dress up, dance together."

Daniel thought about it. He wanted to dance with Johnny so badly. Wanted to pull Johnny flush to him, show off the dancing he knew. He remembered the kids dancing, hands held, moving in a circle. It wouldn't be the same, but it might be nice. *Might* be romantic. Maybe if things worked out in a nice way. Maybe if Sato wasn't hovering like a dark cloud then he could give it a try. Could dance with Johnny and then tell him. He wasn't sure if it'd be as romantic as he wanted it to be, but he could try it.

"Maybe," Daniel said. "If we're here that long, maybe I'll give it a try."

Kumiko smiled at him and then stood wishing him a good evening and leaving the room.

Daniel lunged for his magazine that she'd left setting out on the tatami mat and quickly moved it to the bottom of the bag, burying it under clothes and everything else he'd brought, heart pounding in his chest.

He was worried about when Johnny would arrive, if he'd see.

He wondered if Johnny was okay. He got up and ready for bed then curled up in their bed and waited.

Too late for comfort he heard a knock and Daniel looked out. Johnny was hovering in the door, not coming in, soaking wet. His black shirt was open and water was streaming down his chest. He watched it, the rivulets running down his neck, down his collarbone, down his chest, and disappearing behind his shirt. His clothing clung to every inch of his chest it tried to cover. He could make out everything. It was just a shirt, he'd seen Johnny without one, but dripping wet in his nice clothes was new.

Johnny was running his hand through his hair, pushing wet hair away from his forehead and face and Daniel's mind went blank. He didn't know where to look, he wanted to look everywhere.

"Could you slide me my bag?"

It didn't register at first. It was like there was a disconnect. All coherent thought had left, fled, to watch Johnny lean against the frame, dripping wet.

Daniel sat up and turned slowly to find Johnny's bag, struggling to focus, and slide it across the room towards him wordlessly.

Johnny caught it and headed off in the direction of the bathroom.

Daniel felt laughter bubble up, warmth blossom in his chest as he fell back on the bedding. He was already soaking wet and he was still going to shower. It seemed so silly. He felt like he understood it but Johnny was essentially just swapping water for water and it was kind of delightful. He covered his face in his hands. Trying to settle the buzzing of his skin. Breathing.

He'd felt so bad all day. And Johnny just had to show up dripping wet and it felt like maybe everything would be okay.

What even had he been doing? Had he fallen in the water? Or had he stayed out in the rain the whole time? Was it because LA didn't get a lot of rain? Was Johnny like some plant living through a drought? He had to soak it all up?

Either way part of Daniel worried Johnny would get sick. Wanted to chide him for not taking care of himself.

But the look of him, blue eyes completely unaware of the effect he had on Daniel. Daniel taking in every single spot that shirt clung to, burning it in his memory was almost too much to handle. He wanted to pull him into the room, help him out of his wet clothes, follow the streams of water with his tongue.

He kind of got why Johnny hadn't come in, why he'd hovered. The tatami mats didn't look easy to clean. He probably didn't want to get them soaking wet.

Daniel wouldn't have even thought about it, would've thrown his wet clothes onto the floor without hesitation.

He really needed to get ahold of himself. He tried the breathing exercises Mr. Miyagi taught him. Moving his hands as he did so.

He'd missed Johnny. Was just delighted to see him again. Relieved.

He remembered leaning back against him while everyone put their lanterns in the water, pulling support from him. Feeling close to him, waiting in case Mr. Miyagi needed him, unnerved by how at ease Sato looked. The way Johnny had held him while he cried. Like he knew how hard this was for him and not just Mr. Miyagi.

Johnny returned after a while without his wet clothes and in dry pajamas. His hair was wet but no longer dripping and Daniel kind of missed it.

He took his spot next to Daniel after turning out the light.

"You okay?...shit...right, stupid question," Johnny said.

Daniel wondered if in this moment, in this case, on this trip, he could do something *before* he went to sleep. If Johnny would let him, if he'd understand or if it'd be weird, if it'd be awkward, if Johnny would push him away.

He didn't think he could sleep. Didn't think it'd even be possible with the way his mind was buzzing. The way it kept circling back to watching Mr. Miyag's father's hands fall from his, the way his father's hand fell out of Daniel's. That moment when he knew he was gone. So clear that it was over. That the world was forever changed but would keep going as if Daniel's world hadn't fallen apart.

He'd keep it tame. He reached out wrapping an arm around Johnny and burying his head against his chest. Johnny didn't respond, but an arm came down after a while, didn't push him away just a little pat, a little awkward one like always before it settled around Daniel's shoulders.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" Johnny asked quietly.

Daniel did, but he knew he'd just keep talking all night, crying. He didn't want that. He wanted to be able to greet the morning with a plan, an idea on how to comfort Mr. Miyagi, and the only way to do that was to think. If he talked he'd spin himself around in circles in his own pain unable to get out of it. He wouldn't be able to do what he felt was necessary.

He shook his head, not trusting that saying even no aloud wouldn't start the waterworks that had welled up again.

Johnny's hand moved and Daniel wanted to reach out and grab it and make it stay.

But it came down again, gently on the back of Daniel's head, fingers running through his hair, soothing.

Out of anything he'd ever possibly expected it hadn't been that.

He wondered if it was one of those other science things Johnny had read.

It sent a shiver down his spine and he shut his eyes. It was nice. Thoughts faded out of his mind as he focused on the sensation, of Johnny playing with his hair, his breathing, and the steady sound of Johnny's heartbeat.

Daniel woke up to the gray of the morning. He couldn't believe he'd fallen asleep. He had moved in his sleep. More on top of Johnny than he'd been when he'd fallen asleep, his leg thrown over his hip.

He lifted a hand and very gently pressed the back of his hand to Johnny's forehead. He didn't feel too hot. Which was good. It meant all of his time in the rain or water the night before hadn't gotten him sick.

The air had cooled off a little from the rain. He didn't want to pull away but he wanted to find Mr. Miyagi.

He had an idea of what he wanted to say. And he needed to make sure he was okay.

He carefully rolled off of Johnny and covered him with the blankets, tucking him in so he would stay warm, before grabbing a piece of paper and pen to leave him a note, changing and heading out.

He didn't want Johnny to worry. Like he had the day before. But unlike yesterday, unlike Johnny just being in the kitchen, he might not be in the house somewhere.

Who knew where Mr. Miyagi would be? Who knew when he'd get back?

He felt bad, but he also thought that Johnny would understand.

It took a while to find Mr. Miyagi, but he did, out of the village and on a rock overlooking the sea, shoulders slumped, emanating mourning and pain. Daniel knew what that felt like.

He sat down on the rock next to Mr. Miyagi and talked about his dad. How he'd felt like a terrible son for pulling away and not being there, but how much it meant, he was sure, to show up in those final moments and be there to hold his hand before he passed. He shared his pain, the way he felt now, more positive, but still with that pain, because it would never leave, but he would learn more about it, learn to live with it.

Mr. Miyagi listened as he talked, looking out at the ocean until his eyes were red and filled with tears. Daniel wished Mr. Miyagi was a person who took comfort in hugs. But he didn't reach out. He knew the best thing he could do was to just sit there and be by his side, saying the things Mr. Miyagi needed to hear. That Daniel needed to say.

He thought about how much pain he'd held onto thinking he'd been such a terrible son, for so long, until he left and returned and that trip back to Newark with Johnny, talking with the guys, it reminded him of all those moments that told a different story. One where even though he'd been wracked with guilt, he'd been a kid, and his dad probably knew that.

Understood.

Just like he was sure Mr. Miyagi's dad understood, was proud of him for sticking to the defense only use of karate and going out into the world, making his own way, even if it had hurt. Even if he missed him. Because parents wanted a better life for their kids. And Mr. Miyagi's dad had raised the most resilient man with a heart of gold. A man who helped random talkative kids who got his name wrong. Who fixed things and brought beauty to the valley.

If they'd had had more time, Daniel had a list, a list of things he had wanted to tell Mr. Miyagi's dad. Of all the wonderful things Mr. Miyagi did. How much he owed him. How much he meant to him. How proud he had to be.

Mr. Miyagi keeping up the family tradition, fishing in another sea, one facing the direction of Okinawa. Another Miyagi in a long line of Miyagi's, a master of karate who only used it for defense and a

fisherman, even though he had set down roots so far away.

Daniel wondered if maybe it wasn't just habit or some enjoyment that he found peaceful, or if fishing was something he did to feel closer to his dad, to his home. Across the sea thinking, maybe, just maybe his Dad was out fishing too. And they were fishing at the same time together even though there was an ocean between them.

After a while, they went for a walk. Mr. Miyagi showed him the cannery, telling him tales of him and his father. Walking him around and pointing things out. Telling him stories. It was nice. He looked a little more sturdy. Like walking through it with Daniel helped. Like the way, Daniel knew showing Johnny everything had helped. It helped to just have someone to be there and listen. And on the walk back to the house Mr. Miyagi stopped and looked at Daniel.

"Important to tell people how feel."

Daniel nodded. He understood that. Wishing he'd told his father more often how he felt. Trying to make sure he always told his mother.

"Understand Daniel-san?" Mr. Miyagi looking at him seriously.

"Of course Mr. Miyagi," Daniel said.

Mr. Miyagi studied him a moment then nodded. After brushing off Chozen's taunts Mr. Miyagi spent the day with Yukie. Daniel left them alone. He didn't want to interrupt. And Daniel wanted to see Johnny.

He looked around the house and couldn't find him. He wandered through the town for a while and still couldn't find him. After setting off a small fight in town by breaking a fake weight he wandered the beach wondering where Johnny could've possibly gone. He wandered back into town and heard music coming from the Shinto shrine and walked over wondering if Ichiro was still playing.

There was Johnny's blonde head. It was bent and his brow was furrowed in concentration. He held the instrument that Ichiro had been playing the first time they'd been walking through town with Mr. Miyagi. There were kids around him, hyped up, excited. Sometimes Johnny would falter and a little girl would climb up the steps and lean over him.

"Almost! Like this!"

"Arigato."

The kids would giggle and his mini teacher would pat him on the shoulder and he'd try again. She would nod along as he played. It happened a few times and then when he got it right, a run-through correct they cheered.

"Perfect!" Ichiro said. "Again!"

And Johnny obliged. Playing the song they'd taught him and Ichiro clapped a beat and sang. The kids applauded when he was done. Climbing up the steps and over Johnny, hanging over him like he was a jungle gym.

"Johnny play a new song?"

"Do you know another song?" he asked looking up at the girl.

She turned to look at the other children and Ichiro and they spoke rapidly in Japanese. They seemed to come to an agreement and the kids crowded around Johnny telling him what to do, the order to play. Johnny practiced once, twice, and then satisfied that he'd gotten it they stood in the grass. Ichiro sang again, clapping a beat, but this time there were whistles and shouts added to the singing. The kids danced in the grass slowly and purposeful.

The last time Daniel had seen Ichiro he'd just realized his carrots had been undersold. The difference, with how he was helping the kids teach Johnny songs and singing was so peaceful. A precious moment in the fragments of pain their trip was littered with.

Daniel watched as Johnny played. Eventually, Johnny looked up and his eyes met Daniel's and he smiled, small, tentative, it was a questioning smile.

Are you okay?

Daniel nodded. Ichiro followed Johnny's gaze and caught sight of Daniel and rushed over pulling him through the torii gate. He held his hands up, hands closed, and swayed them above his head as he moved. Easy steps they were dancing. It was clear they wanted him to join.

Daniel followed along, moving to the beat the way he'd been shown. Listening to the shouts, whistles and singing, as Johnny played.

They got him to play another, and another, and then Johnny very carefully handed the instrument back to Ichiro bowing his head.

"Arigato Ichiro-san," then he turned to the small child who'd taught him, "Arigato Yuna sensei."

She beamed up at him absolutely delighted at the title and Johnny bowed his head once more to them all before stepping away from the shrine and towards Daniel.

They walked together through the town, quiet.

"What happened to your shirt?" Johnny asked after a while, pointing to the rip in Daniel's shirt that was wrapped around his waist.

"I was practicing the drum technique and did something incredibly dangerous," Daniel said with a sigh.

He told Johnny about his morning, not going into full detail, but the basics, talking to Mr. Miyagi and then walking around and talking with him more. Then he told Johnny about the cannery and the drum technique. How Mr. Miyagi used to practice avoiding the hooks and how he'd tried with this safety-looking cork on and ended up in the ocean, but then tried again when Mr. Miyagi wasn't looking without a cork. And the shirt thankfully was the only thing that got pierced.

Daniel tried to laugh it off. A brush with death.

But Johnny stopped walking.

Daniel turned to him. Johnny's eyes were wide and he looked horrified.

"Why?" Johnny asked a breathless whisper.

Daniel frowned. "I-" He sighed.

He folded his arms across his chest and looked away.

"Sato's given Mr. Miyagi 3 days to mourn. Chozen is taunting him. Karate here is...there's no referee. I'm worried okay. I want to master anything Mr. Miyagi teaches me in case. In case I have to use it. In case..." he stopped.

He didn't want to say it. It felt like bad luck to say it. To say that he feared Mr. Miyagi might not come home with them. Would either figure out a way to stay with Yukie or Sato would kill him. Because even if Daniel begged him to fight back Mr. Miyagi would not kill Sato. It just wasn't who he was. If they fought Mr. Miyagi would die.

Johnny cupped Daniel's face in his hands. "We'll be here. I'm here. I've got your back, okay? You don't need to rush to master karate again. Mr. Miyagi will go home with you."

He looked so serious. Like he believed it. Like it wasn't just what Daniel wanted to hear.

Daniel wrapped his hand around one of Johnny's wrists, not pulling it away. "And how do you know that?"

"Because if there's a fight to the death I'll do it in his place," Johnny said.

Daniel yanked the hands on his face down and let them go. "What? Why? No!"

"I'm the only one who studied Cobra Kai," Johnny said. "It's meant for this type of thing. I-my hands are already dirty. You and Mr. Miyagi shouldn't have to-Kreese taught us how to fight in this way. And I'm used to street scuffles where someone wants to hurt me. I know how to fight for my life. I'm used to that, so I won't be scared."

"No."

"Daniel-"

"No," Daniel said sternly, a tone he'd picked up from his mom. The no arguments tone.

His heart was pounding in his ears. This was what happened when he left Johnny alone. He'd look absolutely peaceful and sweet and then in his head he was already digging his grave and had made his peace with it. It was that same dark vein of thought that Daniel caught every once in a while. A little river that if he didn't keep an eye on he'd find Johnny bobbing away down it. Where he didn't believe there was anyone in his corner, which meant he didn't think anyone would miss him. The math added up in his head. But it didn't in Daniel's. If Daniel was going to fight he was going to not give up, he would win. But Johnny was prepared to lose.

"We are *all* going home. Together," Daniel said. "Mr. Miyagi will figure it out. He'll find a way out of fighting Sato. You did not come on this trip to die."

"I-"

"No Johnny. No. No dying. Promise me," Daniel said holding out his hand, pinky extended.

Johnny stared at him, more protests on his lips. "I can't promise that. We might get into fights even if we don't want to, even if we try and avoid it," he whispered.

"Fine, promise me you'll look for alternatives. That you won't just throw yourself into the fight as a sacrifice on some stupid altar of honor."

Johnny sighed, shoulders slumping, and held out his pinky, shaking his head but hooking it through Daniels. "Fine."

"Besides," Daniel said with a smile looking up at Johnny. "You're not part of Cobra Kai anymore. You're Miyagi-do now. So you should be practicing the drum technique with me," Daniel picked up the drum holding it up and spinning it between his fingers.

Johnny laughed softly, it was the smallest laugh, but Daniel would take it.

Beni imo

There was something lonely waking up and finding Daniel gone. But reading over his little note made sense. He couldn't be upset about it. It was why they were there after all.

Gone to find Mr. Miyagi. See you later today.

-Daniel

He moved slowly. Later today could mean anything. Could mean dinner or that night. And Johnny didn't want to interrupt. So he got ready. Read a little, tried to practice Japanese and Okinawan again, and joined Yukie for breakfast. He wandered through the village with her, carrying baskets and things she needed to be moved from one point to another. It seemed like it was vegetable day or something. Selling them.

Chozen stood at a little booth with his friends weighing out the vegetables.

It was confusing to Johnny how the whole process worked. A fishing village that no longer could fish because Sato overfished the waters. Wasn't it also Sato's home? Wasn't he worried about the people? And then he owned the land they borrowed to grow their vegetables? Yet they sold their vegetables back to Sato? Did they make *any* profit? It seemed meager.

"Ah coward's student," Chozen said when they arrived, snide laughter in his voice. "Why'd you pick a coward to teach you? Want to be a coward?"

Yukie was measuring out her vegetables and Johnny frowned.

"Been to war Chozen?" Johnny asked.

"No."

"Do you think survivors of war are cowards?" Johnny asked.

"No."

"Then how is Mr. Miyagi a coward?"

Chozen frowned at this. Looked more pissed.

"Mr. Miyagi survived war, more pain than you or I could imagine. And he chose kindness. To help people. If I could become even a fraction of the man he is, it would be an *honor*," Johnny said, voice steady, stressing the word, holding Chozen's gaze.

The way Kreese had taught him. He knew it was intimidating. Knew it held a challenge, a dare.

Chozen scoffed like what Johnny said was silly, but Johnny saw a flicker there like it didn't go through as deeply as it had. As if a seed of doubt had been planted.

Yukie patted Johnny's shoulder and he glanced over. She had her cash, her basket, was ready to go.

"Kindness is weak," Chozen said. A desperate need to get the last word in. "Kind men will always die, will always lose."

Johnny took her basket for her nodding his head. He understood the underlying threat and he looked back at Chozen. "Not if I can help it."

He hoped the warning would scare him off, that it'd give him pause, that his muscle and the return of the threat, the fact he didn't back down would reign him in.

Yukie hooked her arm through Johnny's. Patting it as they walked back towards the house. "Chozen-san, always hmm...angry. Was...angry baby."

Johnny laughed and she looked up at him smiling. He helped her around the house. She gave him errands to run. Asked him to drop something off at a house down the street, to pick something up someplace else. She'd drawn him a map of the village and would mark off where he needed to go, what he needed to do.

Every door he knocked on felt awkward. Filled him with panic. What would he say? What would he do? His Okinawan was awful, his Japanese as well. He didn't know enough and no matter how much he tried to practice on his way to his destination it always fled as soon as soon as the door opened. But without fail they'd take one look at him and go "Ah!" and dip into their house or walk past him into their gardens and talk quickly to him.

He'd hear names.

Yukie.

Miyagi.

Just by looking at him, they knew *why* he was there. And they'd press whatever he was to pick up in his hands or take whatever Yukie had given him to give them and then they'd bow and smile at him and he'd leave more confused but relieved.

Yukie always thanked him, very seriously whenever he came back. Like he was helping her take a lot off her plate, even though she still looked so busy.

After lunch, she motioned out to the village.

"Go, have fun," she told him, gently squeezing his arm.

Johnny nodded and left. He wandered around for a bit, wondering where Daniel and Mr. Miyagi were, hoping they were okay. Hoping Chozen and Sato were leaving them alone, that they were somewhere talking about their shared experience and healing.

Children were running around but they came to a halt in front of him. They talked amongst themselves, crowding around staring up at him and then one walked forward, a little girl.

"USA?"

"Yes," Johnny said.

The kid frowned and pointed at the airbase.

"Oh, no," Johnny said. "Mr. Miyagi is my sensei."

The tentativeness faded at this and hands grabbed his pulling him along.

"I'm Yuna," the girl said.

"Johnny."

"How tall?"

"Over 6 feet."

"Feet?" noses wrinkled at this followed by giggles.

"Girlfriend?"

"No."

"How old?"

"17."

"So old!"

"Married?"

"No."

They seemed disappointed by this.

"Can you swim?"

"Yes."

"Can you surf?"

"Sort of."

They were more impressed by this based on the chatter it instilled.

"Can you fish?"

Johnny thought about it. It seemed simple enough.

"No."

They were absolutely stunned by this. Stopping in the middle of the street from where they were pulling him along to look up at him wide-eyed.

"Miyagi sensei teach what?"

"Karate."

"Ohhhhhh."

"Can't eat karate," one kid mumbled with a frown.

"I thought you didn't have a lot of fish?" Johnny said.

One of the kids sighed like someone much much older and wrinkled their nose with a deep frown. "Few fish. Mostly vegetables."

"Do you like vegetables?" Johnny asked.

"No."

"I like carrots," one said.

"I like beni imo," another said.

"What's beni imo?" Johnny asked.

"Purple potato."

"Purple?"

Yuna nodded with a big smile. "Delicious."

"I'll have to try it."

She nodded enthusiastically.

"Can you play music?"

"Some."

"Sanshin?"

"What's a sanshin?" Johnny asked.

And that question got them moving. They were pulling him down the street to the shrine where the guy from the day before had been sitting and playing a string instrument. Ichiro, Johnny remembered.

The kids talked to Ichiro and he looked at Johnny and then back down at them and smiled nodding his head. He got up and patted the spot he'd vacated. They pulled Johnny forward and he sat. Ichiro handed him the instrument. It was light in his hands. Looked like it was made of snakeskin. It only had three strings.

"This is a sanshin," Yuna said climbing up next to him. Ichiro took a little black claw off his finger and passed it over.

"This is a bachi," she said passing it to Johnny. "Use to play."

"Like a pick for a guitar," Johnny said.

She nodded. Johnny held it carefully in his hands and Yuna corrected the way he held it, the way his fingers curled around the neck, over his hand to strum it a couple of times. She spoke to Ichiro trying to decide something and then seemed to come to an agreement. They

worked him through the cords, teaching him a song. Then he played it again and again and again. Until they were satisfied. Then they taught him another, and the process continued until they deemed the songs he learned good enough. And then Ichiro and the kids sang and danced. They looked so happy. Pleased with him. It was nice.

After a while he felt eyes on him, watching. He looked up, out past the shrine grounds, Daniel. His shirt was tied around his waist, he was wearing a black tank top, arms crossed. Johnny was glad to see him in one piece, unharmed. Ichiro called out to him, he was pulled in and Johnny watched, amused as they taught him the dance they'd been doing for a while. His little teacher had called it Kachāshī.

After spending the afternoon walking around talking they returned to Miyagi's house and Daniel changed. They ate dinner and returned to walk around, feeling the need to give Mr. Miyagi and Yukie more time alone. Johnny wondered if Mr. Miyagi's father had survived if it'd have been the same. Leaving to give him time to catch up. Forty years was a long time, they had so much to talk about. And Daniel still wanted to learn the drum karate. Focused as he swung his arms, thoughtful. Johnny watched him. He was trying to help him puzzle over it. Understand it. Going through everything Kreese had taught him to try and find something he knew. Trying to think of what he'd seen in the books he'd read. But it was different.

He heard light footsteps behind him and turned, Kumiko was coming forward curious. She laughed telling them it looked like an o-bon dance and showed them the moves to the dance, singing softly as she did and telling them to follow her.

Johnny did, it reminded him of kata, he knew it wasn't smooth or as fluid as hers, but it was worth trying. Then he heard the kids giggling. He spotted Ichiro behind them and Yuna called out from the fire.

Johnny excused himself from the dancing lesson to walk carefully around the vegetable patches to the fire where Ichiro was motioning for him to come. Around the fire sat people he recognized from his day's errands around town and they greeted him warmly.

"Beni imo," an elderly woman said slowly, smiling and putting potatoes in his arms.

"I told them you wanted to try," Yuna said grinning up at him. "For you and friends."

Three. He bowed his thanks and turned in time to watch Chozen kick Daniel and for him to go down.

Johnny ran.

He heard Chozen.

"You insult my honor again, and I kill you."

Kumiko grabbed a tomato and threw it at Chozen's back as he walked away and Chozen stopped stripping out of his shirt and throwing it back.

"If you want to fight, why don't you come back here and fight me?" Johnny called and Chozen paused looking back.

He knew if Chozen came back he wouldn't be able to stop himself. He wouldn't be able to pull back. He'd break his promises. He was doing everything he could to not run after him. To stand between Daniel and Chozen, if he came back and not chase the fight.

Kumiko was checking on Daniel, helping him up asking if he was okay.

"He insulted my honor."

"How is this honorable? I don't think you know the meaning of the word."

A hand fell on Johnny's shoulder and he turned. Daniel was holding his arm across his stomach. He searched Daniel quickly, for additional injuries but it just seemed to be the one.

"Ignore him. He's not worth it," Daniel said softly.

Johnny felt some of the anger die, he should get Daniel home safe instead. Patch him up.

"Bye-bye baby," Chozen said with a little wave walking away with his friends, laughing.

"You going to be okay to walk back?" Johnny asked softly.

"Yeah," Daniel said. "What'd you get?"

"Oh!" Kumiko said clapping her hands together. "Beni imo!"

"What's that?" Daniel asked taking the one Johnny handed him.

Johnny handed the other to Kumiko who smiled up at him before turning to Daniel.

"Sweet potato."

"Apparently it's purple."

"That's right!" Kumiko said.

"Purple," Daniel said with disbelief open his up and shaking his fingers as the hot steam hit them. "Oh man, this is hot."

"Pulled straight out of the fire, sorry should've warned you," Johnny said, carefully peeling his the way Kumiko was. It really was purple on the inside.

"What color are your sweet potatoes?" Kumiko asked.

"Orange," Daniel said looking at it.

They were walking slowly back to Mr. Miyagi's home and Daniel was leaning against him. Curled inward still a little bit. But he was eating and talking with Kumiko while he ate. They were complaining about Chozen.

"Yukie said he was an angry baby," Johnny said.

Kumiko laughed and Daniel grinned at that but it seemed the laughter hurt.

They stopped at the gate, pausing when they took in Mr. Miyagi and Yukie dressed nicely across from each other, staring into each other's eyes and moving slowly. Kumiko whispered to them in a voice of awe, explaining the tea ceremony. Daniel was staring at her when she mentioned how romantic it was with a sigh. Johnny finished his sweet potato.

Kumiko was cute. If Daniel picked her, he didn't think he could be mad. She was nice and he liked that she'd thrown a tomato at Chozen. She'd stand up for herself and others. She was brave and strong.

He wondered if Daniel and Mr. Miyagi would stay. Both of them in Okinawa. Mr. Miyagi with Yukie and Daniel with Kumiko. It stung. He'd end up going home alone.

Or maybe they'd try and figure out how to get both ladies home with them. He didn't have any money to do that, to help. He also didn't know how it'd work with immigration or customs. That was more of a Jimmy thing.

They carefully pushed through the gate trying not to interrupt the date happening. In a quiet part of the garden, a hand grabbed Johnny's arm and he turned. Daniel was heading into their shared room.

"Children said you are learning sanshin?" she asked, head tilted looking up at him curiously.

"They taught me a little today," Johnny said softly.

"Did they teach you *Kaadikuuu?"*

*"*Uh, I don't know. I didn't really catch the song names."

She nodded thoughtfully then sang the way she had before when teaching the o-bon dance. She stopped after a while. "That one?"

"Is it kind of fast?"

She nodded and her face broke into a smile. "That's the one."

"Uh yeah, they taught me that one."

She clapped her hand delightedly. "If you're here for o-bon you will have to play."

"Okay, if we're still here, I'll uh, try."

"Good," she said hand patting his arm. "Tomorrow we all go sightseeing okay? Tell Daniel?"

"Oh, really?"

She smiled. "Of course. I'll drive you, show you all the highlights."

"Thank you, Kumiko."

"Of course."

"Kumiko, is there something for bruises? Something for Daniel to feel better?"

"Oh!" she said, "Yes, we've got something, I'll go get it wait here."

She darted off through the house and came back with a basket. In it was gauze, tape, water, a small towel, a bowl, and a tin. She opened the tin to show him, it contained a green powder. It looked an awful lot like the tea he'd made the other day at breakfast.

"Mmm, so you mix with water, make a paste, put on the skin, wrap gently, and then should feel better in the morning, okay?"

"Uh yeah, I think I got it."

"Hope Daniel feels better tomorrow. Good night Johnny," she said pressing the basket into his arms.

Johnny turned towards the room he shared with Daniel with the basket. He carefully pushed the door open. Daniel was standing in the room, arm still holding his abdomen.

"Hey, Kumiko gave me some stuff to help," Johnny said. "Though it looks like tea. Want to find a comfortable spot?"

Daniel looked at him. It didn't seem to click.

"So I can apply it?" Johnny continued. "It's easier when someone helps you when you're injured, makes sure you get it right. Unless you want to hover awkwardly in front of a mirror trying to do this yourself? I figure it'd take a while and this way you can be comfortable."

Johnny sat down next to the bed, it was the only comfortable spot. "You could change first into what you want to sleep in and we'll put this on." He picked up the tin.

"Okay," Daniel said. "I'll get ready for bed then."

Johnny nodded. "Let me know if you need any help."

Daniel laughed softly, then hissed at the pain it caused. He gathered his stuff and left.

Johnny set out the things Kumiko had given him mixing the powder with the water. It fizzed and foamed. It wasn't tea. It definitely didn't smell like tea either.

Daniel came back and put his hand on Johnny's shoulder leaning on him as he sunk down onto his knees next to him. Johnny turned, holding out his arms to see if he could help. He wrapped an arm

around Daniel's back and helped lower him down with a grunt of pain.

Johnny shifted forward, sitting in seiza, which was so familiar but a way he hadn't sat in months that he almost felt like he was back in the dojo. He focused on Daniel. He hesitated. Should he lift up Daniel's shirt? Ask him to do it? If it hurt to move, then he should do it, but it felt...a little too intimate.

He wished Daniel would talk. Wouldn't just watch him. But he was in pain.

"I'm going to lift up your shirt a bit, is that okay?" Johnny asked.

Daniel nodded.

Johnny pushed himself forward a little and very carefully lifted up the top of the t-shirt Daniel had picked for bed. His abdomen was a dark red. He folded the hem of his shirt up carefully letting it rest on Daniel's chest. Any worry about awkwardness fled. He had a job to do. He picked up the bowl with the green paste. He dipped his hand in, it was weird. A little warm, a little cool, tingly.

"Uh, it's warm *and* cold,"

"Okay," Daniel whispered.

Johnny carefully placed his hand over Daniel's abdomen. His fingers ghosted over the red mark on his stomach and lower ribs, coating it in the green, trying to be as gentle as possible.

"You'll let me know if it hurts?"

Daniel let out a snort of laughter again. "Johnny you're barely touching me. It's fine. Like Ma's rougher when I'm wounded."

Johnny looked at him then back down.

"I'm not made of glass, like I kicked your ass, you remember that right?"

"I do...I just... I can't hurt you again," Johnny said softly.

Daniel let out a huff of air. "Fixing isn't hurting."

Johnny nodded, all the red was covered in green paste and he cleaned his fingers off with the towel and a bit of water before getting the

gauze. He'd done this part a lot. Too many times.

"Can you lean up a little or sit up?" Johnny asked. "I can help."

Daniel brushed off his hands, carefully pushing himself up with his arms so Johnny could wrap the gauze around him. He'd lost count long ago of how often he'd had to patch himself up. It was so familiar he could probably do this in his sleep or with his eyes closed.

"I'm sorry," Johnny said.

"For what?"

"Not being there. I shouldn't have left to get the beni imo."

"It's a purple sweet potato," Daniel said. "I'd have been mad if you hadn't gotten us some. And what you wanted us both to be beaten and bruised tonight?"

Johnny frowned. "No, I..." He sighed taping it off the end. "What did Chozen mean that you dishonored him?"

"He was cheating people when they were selling their vegetables. I went with Ichiro, helped him get his carrots there, and then Chozen and his goons weren't paying attention and I tried to help by like setting it up for Ichiro and the weights flew off as if he had the worlds heaviest carrots and I picked one of the weights up and snapped it in half and a fight broke out. People were pissed. Chozen was pissed at me."

"But you showed the truth," Johnny said gently pulling Daniel's shirt back down and covering him with the blanket as he laid back down.

Daniel gave him a look, amused with a hint of annoyance.

"Yeah, I'm the bad guy. I ruined his little scheme."

Johnny shook his head with a frown. "I went to that stand today too, didn't even think to check."

"Why'd you go?"

"I ran errands for Yukie all day, one of the errands was selling vegetables. I talked with Chozen. I thought the amount she got was pathetic, but I don't know how finances work in Okinawa alone how much vegetables go for." He sighed rubbing his face in his hands. "What is wrong with him?"

"That's the question right? Him and Sato, I don't get either of them."

Johnny felt a hand on his arm and he looked at Daniel.

"Go do your shower if you're gonna."

Johnny looked around for the time, it was getting late. "Yeah, okay. Uh, Kumiko said she's taking us sightseeing tomorrow, so we want to be ready early for that. She's driving."

"You look like you ate something bitter. I doubt she's as bad as Louie," Daniel said giving his hand a squeeze.

"Yeah, you're right. Want me to get you anything?" Johnny asked.

Daniel looked thoughtful for a moment then shook his head. Johnny put away the rest of the supplies and grabbed his things to head to the bath. He stopped next to the phone, pulling out his international card and calling the number he'd memorized over five years ago.

"Hello?" Bobby asked, he sounded tired.

"Hey," Johnny said. "Checking-in as promised."

"Yeah? How's island life treating you?"

Johnny wondered not for the first time how much he should say. He'd told Bobby the day before that Mr. Miyagi's father had died. Bobby had gotten quiet at that. To say what had happened that day, it was almost like some bizarre confessional. Like Bobby was already a priest or whatever religious guy he wanted to be.

"Johnny?" Bobby asked a tinge of worry.

"Daniel got into a fight today, I wasn't there to stop it," Johnny said softly.

"He okay?"

"I think he will be but-"

"Johnny you can't always be watching him and keeping him safe."

"This guy won't leave him alone and his uncle won't leave Mr. Miyagi alone."

"Sato right? And Chozen?" Bobby asked.

"Yeah."

"What did you do today?" Bobby asked.

Johnny sighed leaning against the wall, "I helped Yukie run errands. Went to practically every house in the village. And then some kids wanted to talk, I met a kid named Yuna who along with this guy Ichiro and the other kids taught me how to play a sanshin."

"What's a sanshin?"

"It's like a 3 string instrument, twangy,"

Bobby laughed softly. "Okay and then what? Where was Daniel?"

"Out talking with Mr. Miyagi."

"And then?"

"Well we met up later and the kids made him dance. And then after dinner, we went for a walk and ran into Kumiko who showed us the steps to the o-bon dance. Yuna and the other kids and Ichiro were around this fire and called me over and it was all these people I'd met throughout the day and they gave me beni imo, it's a purple sweet potato."

"Purple?"

"Purple," Johnny sighed rubbing his face. "And then after I got these potatoes I hear a fight happening and high-tailed it back and Chozen had kicked Daniel in the stomach, and he fell to the ground almost immediately. And Chozen didn't fight me. Didn't turn around and...I mean I baited him, but he didn't, and I tried to help, right? There's this green stuff for when you're hurt that they've got and I. Bobby I did this to Daniel all the time, and it was so hard for him to move like he was in so much pain that even *laughing* hurt and I keep thinking I did that to him before. He's been in the same or worse situation before and it's my fault and I should've been there, I promised I'd have his back and I failed, and the way Sato and Chozen are, what if they're like Kreese? Or if it's like Halloween? Where that impulse control is just gone like someone broke the breaks? Karate here is to the death Bobby, *death*. I don't want to come back home alone."

"Breathe the way Mr. Miyagi taught you, Johnny," Bobby said softly. "I wanna hear it. That deep in-breath, that slow out. Right, just like that. Again....one more...yeah, how's that?"

"Better," Johnny muttered.

Bobby laughed, "You sound bitter about it. You trust Mr. Miyagi right?"

"Of course!"

"So you gotta trust that he knows what he's doing."

"But Bobby-"

"Don't but Bobby me. The guys like what 50 something? Lived through a war and countless tragedy. He beat Kreese. He can handle his hometown. As for Chozen, he probably won't let it go. Not until he hits like a brick wall or something. What was that science thing? Man is my brain already leaking out everything I learned? College is going to be hell if that's the case. Newtons law of motion. Right? Why was that so hard to remember but I have feeling the mitochondria being the powerhouse of the cell is going to be locked in there until I'm 70 at least. Sorry, right, okay so don't be that brick wall. Promise me you won't be that brick wall. Because the other law was something about an equal amount of damage hitting both things. Aha! I remembered it. Take that! Okay so third law right? Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. So if you play the damn brick wall you're going to get hit pretty damn hard. Use strategy okay? I know, not really a cobra kai strength. Kreese didn't really teach strategy, just brute force. But keep trying to resolve things peacefully. Distract. Do not engage."

"Yeah," Johnny said softly.

"Promise me something okay?"

"Depends on what."

"Don't beat yourself up over this. There are going to be moments where Daniel gets hurt that you can't protect him. Like are you going to get upset every time he gets a papercut?"

"..."

"Johnny *I swear*-"

"Maybe," Johnny mumbled.

"Oh my god, you sound like a surly toddler. Dude, go get some sleep and like think about it okay? You know Daniel can handle himself. He

can take a hit. He can take a lot and you know that. So calm down, shower, breathe and get some sleep."

Johnny sighed. "Have a good day Bobby."

"Yeah, good night Johnny."

Johnny hung up and continued to the bath.

Bobby was right.

He was right an uncomfortable amount of the time.

He knew Daniel could handle himself. But seeing him hurt was awful. Knowing he'd been so close to helping but had failed ate away at him.

He sighed rubbing his face. He couldn't see a good end to this.

No matter what Bobby said.

Unless something knocked everyone off the track they were on it was going to turn into a nightmare.

He wondered if they could just run. If he could just grab Mr. Miyagi, apologize to Yukie, and fly home.

He doubted it.

Mr. Miyagi probably wouldn't allow it. And Daniel wouldn't leave without him. And Johnny wouldn't leave Mr. Miyagi behind.

He'd have to wait for an opening. He'd seen Chozen waver, even just a little, maybe he could get them to change course somehow.

Save everyone some heartache.

If only.

Picnic by the Sea

Daniel woke up feeling better. Miyagi's medicine usually did that. Though it had been kind of nice to have Johnny do the application instead of Mr. Miyagi. They'd have to work on the guilt Johnny still held onto. Daniel was past it. Ready to move forward but Johnny was still looking down at all of it having not taken a step forward. Having not realized Daniel was further ahead of him waiting.

He pulled away from Johnny and pushed himself up, it didn't hurt to move. And in the shower in the morning the bruise was barely blossoming. It was like magic.

It was tender but it didn't really hurt too badly.

Smelled awful.

He was surprised Johnny hadn't requested a different room. Relieved he hadn't. Just had slept by his side like normal.

He dressed and did his morning practice.

On his way back he noticed a large bouquet sitting on the front steps.

He picked it up. They were all white flowers. There was a card. Daniel read it over.

"Dear Mr. Miyagi,

We're so sorry to hear about your loss.

We want to express our deepest sympathy.

If you need anything do not hesitate to reach out.

It's only a 16-hour flight.

Sincerely yours,

Tommy, Bobby, Dutch, and Jimmy"

Daniel carefully put the card back in its envelope. It wasn't for him

and he was still touched. Touched that they knew and that they'd reached out, figured out how to send flowers to Mr. Miyagi from so far away.

He wondered how they were spending their summer. He expected they were on the beach, drinking around bonfires, challenging each other to race into the waters. Maybe they'd done some road trip somewhere.

Whatever they were doing was more fun and exciting than what Daniel and Johnny were doing. Less painful for sure.

He carried it back in towards the kitchen, to put it somewhere where Mr. Miyagi would see it.

Johnny was up, talking with Yukie and helping her serve breakfast. She smiled at him as he set the bouquet in a vase with water. Moving it to make sure the envelope was visible.

"Practice?" she asked.

"Yeah," Daniel said taking his seat at the table. "It's so nice, everything is so peaceful in the morning."

"Kumiko said she's taking you to sightsee today?" Yukie asked.

"Yes," Johnny said. "Do you want us to bring you anything while we're out?"

Yukie laughed squeezing Johnny's arm. "No no! Have fun!"

"Yeah, Johnny. Let's just have fun today huh?" Daniel said amused. "You know you're *allowed* to have fun sometimes right?"

Johnny gave him a look and Daniel burst out laughing. So absolutely serious. They'd work on that. Between Kumiko and Daniel, together, they'd make sure Johnny had some fun. Make sure he had some good memories of Okinawa.

Daniel was looking forward to it.

They finished breakfast and Johnny got up to help clean up but Yukie swatted at his hand and shooed them out.

They greeted Mr. Miyagi outside working on repairs and then Kumiko drove up with a small rusty white car.

It was tight, the three of them. Daniel sat in the middle hand falling on Johnny's thigh out of habit.

Kumiko caught it and her eyes flicked up to Daniel and she smiled at him, knowingly and amused and Daniel worked hard to fight off the blush. He didn't know how to explain that things were just different in California. That he'd missed it. That he liked being all up in Johnny's space.

There wasn't a lot of it in the car and Johnny had sat with his arm along the back seat behind him, his other arm along the side of the door, facing towards them as much as he could and he didn't know how to tell her that Johnny having this open at ease body language was so important, not just because it meant Daniel got to lean up against him, but how much he'd progressed through the months.

It'd take him forever to catch her up on every little thing. How much of a compliment this relaxed Johnny was for her driving because with Louie he'd nearly snapped in half he'd been so tense.

He talked instead about Okinawa, asked her questions. And she laughed, hair whipping in the wind as she drove answering his questions and telling him about life on the island. About Okinawa before it was Okinawa. Before Japan or the USA had taken over. The Ryukyu Islands.

They visited a castle and raced to the top and Daniel realized Johnny was pulling away.

He'd seen Johnny run, knew he was fast, he should've won, but he'd *let* them win, a tie for the two of them. He noticed he walked behind them like a chaperone, like a third wheel.

He had to keep reaching back and grabbing Johnny pulling him towards them, to walk *with* them while Kumiko talked.

Kumiko caught it, catching Daniel's eyes and raising an eyebrow. She helped. She'd pull him along too. Not letting him fall behind, hooking an arm through his. Talking to him, asking him questions. If Daniel didn't know that Kumiko knew he'd have been worried about the way it looked so natural for her to hold his arm and talk to him. It was more concerning how Johnny looked at her, listened to her, how she laughed at his jokes.

He made it look so easy. Kumiko didn't understand Daniel's jokes. But Johnny spoke slowly, explained his jokes and she was delighted. And

he looked so damn pleased with himself.

She drove them north along the coast and it was so beautiful he couldn't stay upset for long. The skies were clear and beautiful and the water was so blue. The air was so clean.

"You know Shō Hashi, now we go to a spot famous from Shō Kei. Did your books mention Shō Kei?" Kumiko asked with a smile on her face.

Daniel frowned trying to place the name. He shook his head.

Kumiko nodded parking and hopping out. She opened the trunk grabbing a large bag that she threw over her shoulder and led them out to the coast. She turned and pointed and they took in the almost green ocean that slowly darkened to a rich blue and the cliffs.

"It looks kind of like an elephant," Daniel said staring out at the formation. There was a hole in it and a curve like the trunk of an elephant.

Kumiko laughed. "Right? Shō Kei, once said this spot was big enough for 10,000 people to sit here," she said walking out to the vast expanse of the field.

She opened her bag and pulled out a cloth that she unfurled onto the grass and sat down, taking off her shoes and curling her feet under her opening her bag and pulling out boxes.

"You packed a picnic?" Daniel asked taking off his shoes and sitting.

"Mmhmm, I thought it'd be nice to get far from Naha and Tomi Village, somewhere...mmm...quieter?"

Daniel laughed. She was right there wasn't a helicopter flying overhead every five seconds.

"Very hard to find quiet. There are 32 military bases on the island and they cover a fourth of the island," she said with a sigh. "But here it's quiet and peaceful. Ah, this is very popular with US soldiers, maybe you will like this?" she said handing each of them a box.

"What is it?" Daniel asked.

She had a mischievous smile on her face. He glanced over at Johnny who was carefully opening his box. It looked kind of like the bentos Mr. Miyagi had made them from the outside. Kumiko was pouring

them drinks into little cups she'd pulled out of her bag and humming while she did so.

"Oh! It smells like Mexican food," Johnny said.

Daniel looked back at him, his blue eyes were large and full of surprise.

Kumiko laughed. "Recent invention by Matsuzo Gibo he created it last year and it's kind of strange but all the soldiers love it. It's called taco rice."

"Taco rice," Daniel repeated to himself opening the box. It smelled like what he'd find back home. Chopped tomato, lettuce, cheese, and beef, and below it, peeking through was rice instead of a tortilla. "How do you eat this? Tacos are like handheld food," Daniel asked studying it curiously.

Kumiko unwrapped a cloth and handed him and Johnny spoons.

"Kwacchii sabira" Kumiko said with a grin. "Mmm Okinawan phrase...I'll have a feast."

"Kwacchii sabira," Daniel and Johnny repeated.

Daniel glanced at Johnny who seemed fairly happy with his taco rice. He remembered Johnny telling him he had a favorite taco stand and would eat it on the beach. And now he knew Johnny also sometimes slept on the beach. He was starting to realize Johnny lived on the beach more than anywhere else. Or had.

There was a nice breeze and the wind played through his hair. Kumiko was asking him about California and the ocean there, about the beaches. Johnny was telling her about the sandy beaches and the sun and the palm trees.

"So what's this?" Daniel asked after a while lifting up his cup.

"Shikwasa juice."

It was tart and sweet. A citrus fruit he realized after a sip.

It was nice. To sit in the field on the cliffs overlooking the sea with Kumiko and Johnny. A nice break. A moment without Sato or Chozen. Just friends having a picnic.

"Johnny do you know how to surf?" Kumiko asked.

Daniel turned to her in horror. She was *not* going to ask about the magazine was she? Had she not understood? Had he not made it clear how embarrassing it was? That he hadn't meant for her to see it. Hadn't even meant to bring it. He just spent so much time looking at it, it'd become a habit. A bad habit. A terribly embarrassing habit. And she was going to tell Johnny about it and he'd heave to run off the edge of the cliff and dive into the ocean.

"I surfed for a bit in middle school," Johnny said.

Daniel looked over at him. He had thought all of the things in the magazines were props. That maybe they'd just handed him things to make it seem like he could do them. A Ken doll that could do everything for the readers to project upon. But Johnny *could* surf? Had surfed? Did that mean he could do everything in the magazines? That it wasn't just for show? Daniel didn't know what to do with that information.

"Why did you stop?"

"My board broke."

Daniel had seen surfers wipe out sometimes while he'd been on the beach training with Mr. Miyagi. Had felt the strength of the waves on him while trying to balance. He could only imagine being out trying to surf and a board snapping because of a wave. It had to be awful to be battered around like that. But exhilarating every time you caught a wave. Maybe like snowboarding or skateboarding. But on the waves, with the ocean, somewhere Johnny liked to be.

Kumiko nodded thoughtfully. "Hmmm, they can be expensive to replace."

"Yeah," Johnny said softly.

"You are learning sanshin...do you play other instruments?"

"I studied guitar and the drums for a bit."

"You stopped?"

Johnny looked uncomfortable.

"Yeah," he said softly.

"Why? Yuna said. "You looked like you had fun learning sanshin."

"They broke."

Daniel felt cold rush down his spine. A sinking feeling. Maybe the ocean *hadn't* broken Johnny's board. Maybe it hadn't had a chance to get old and worn and for the ocean to take it away. Maybe something less of a force of nature had snapped it. Something evil.

"Sid?" Daniel whispered before he could catch himself, stop himself.

Johnny looked up surprised, almost like he'd been cornered, caught in a lie he'd never expected anyone to see through. It was more of a confirmation than any words Johnny could say.

Daniel wondered if he could get one free pass from Mr. Miyagi to attack first. Wondered if that could be the exception for this one situation. If Daniel was ever given a time machine the first thing he'd do would be to find Johnny as a kid and make sure he got to go somewhere else. Somewhere safer, away from Sid. Away from Kreese. The problem was, those two led him to find the guys, and led him to Daniel's life. But he wanted more than anything to keep Johnny away from Sid and Kreese for the rest of his life. Put himself between them. Tell them off.

Both seemed willing to throw the first punch. Maybe Daniel could just bait them and get around the defense only use of his karate and not disappoint Mr. Miyagi. There had to be a grey area there.

Kumiko looked between the two of them.

"Who is Sid?"

"Johnny's stepfather," Daniel said more venom than he expected.

He didn't deserve the title. He knew Johnny never called him that. Just called him Sid because father wasn't a word that should've ever been associated with Sid, but it saved time, saved the explanation of the intricacies. He had several more choice rude words he wanted to toss in there, wanted to rant, feeling riled up about it.

Was that why every single issue of the magazine had Johnny doing something different? Why he was like a Ken doll? Because he'd find a hobby and then Sid would destroy it? Everything but karate? No wonder Johnny was so protective of his bonsai. Scared Sid would come in while he wasn't looking and kill it, break the pot and rip the plant to shreds.

When they got home Daniel wasn't letting Johnny go home. He wouldn't let Johnny go back into that house alone. If his mom came back from Fresno he'd ask if Johnny could stay with them. If he got to live at Mr. Miyagi's in that guest house he'd make sure Johnny stayed there too. No excuses, no worries about being in the way, or letting him pull back. He'd hold Johnny's hand and make the place theirs so that Johnny had a safe space to stay.

Ah, Refugees.

Shit. Did Mr. Miyagi know? Was that why Mr. Miyagi had them build the guest house? Because he knew how bad Sid was and was trying to give him somewhere to live that was safe? Had he realized Johnny was in need of a place to lay his head at night that wasn't his car or the beach?

Daniel needed to do something nice for Mr. Miyagi. For taking a look at the two of them in vastly different situations and saying *those two boys should stay here, I don't have space for them so I'll build them a space*.

Daniel wanted that so badly. To go home with Mr. Miyagi and Johnny and live in the guest house with Johnny.

Kumiko looked at him surprised then leaned forward and gently patted Johnny's shoulder.

"I have a cousin with a surf shop. If you are here long enough, we can go surfing," she said smiling warmly at him.

"Don't expect too much," Johnny said. "It's been a long time."

"Maybe like...what is the saying? Like riding a bike? You'll remember when you're on the board."

Daniel smiled softly. He wanted to see Johnny surfing. Thought it might be a fun way to work on balance. Something Johnny was impressively good at. Mr. Miyagi would approve of it. He wondered if Mr. Miyagi would be good at it.

After their peaceful and leisurely picnic lunch, Kumiko drove them back south, back towards Naha. She promised to show them around, explaining the busy city near the airport.

The city *was* busy. Crowded, noisier. She found parking for her white car and they got out wandering around.

"It's so hot," Daniel complained, his shirt sticking to his skin. He pulled on it with a frown.

Kumiko looked at him and grinned then grabbed his hand and Johnny's and pulled them down the busy streets to a little shop. She pulled them in and it felt like they'd stepped foot back into the USA. It looked like an old-school diner with English everywhere and little bits of Japanese and Okinawan.

It took Daniel only a second to catch on and he pulled out his wallet stepping forward.

"What flavor should we get?" he asked Kumiko.

He'd win this time. He'd treat them.

Johnny was distracted, looking around, it was a perfect time.

"Salt," she whispered to him with a grin.

"Salt?" he asked looking at her incredulously.

She nodded so sincerely. He sighed and motioned with his head for her to grab a seat with Johnny. She smiled, hooking her arm through Johnny's and talking softly to him, pulling him over to one of the booths.

"Three uh salt?" Daniel said walking up to the counter.

The guy nodded going to work. He looked over to where Kumiko and Johnny were sitting. They looked so at ease around each other.

If only *this* could've been their trip. A vacation overseas meeting a new friend who showed them around. A trip where Johnny and Daniel could just wander around trying new things, exploring, learning.

He wondered if they could do it again someday. Come back to Okinawa or go somewhere else.

They'd plan it next time. So there'd be actual time to study and Johnny wouldn't stay up all night at the library studying. They'd talk about the things they wanted to do and come up with a plan of what they wanted to do.

One day maybe.

He'd add it to the list. It was always growing. He couldn't believe

Chicago and its thick pizza was still on the list, but it was. All sorts of places back home and now he was expanding the places they could go.

He'd save up, treat Johnny to some nice trip eventually.

He wondered what it'd be like if Kumiko visited them in LA. He thought of her meeting the guys and the thought was kind of funny. He wondered if they'd behave or not.

If she'd be thrilled.

They'd for sure show her around everywhere just like she was showing them around.

He wanted to reciprocate it. It'd be fun to have international visitors. He could cook for her, have Johnny help. He liked teaching Johnny how to cook, liked watching him work, liked showing off his own skills.

They could pick her up from the airport and show her the palm trees and the Hollywood sign and go to games and maybe visit the tar pits and go to amusement parks.

He paid and put his wallet away.

In small moments he could forget. Forget that they were in Okinawa because of Mr. Miyagi's father had died. That Sato had only given them three days and they were running out of them. That they probably shouldn't be out and about doing whatever they wanted. That they should've grabbed Mr. Miyagi and run to the airport.

But Mr. Miyagi probably wouldn't go for it. To come home just to bury his father and then leave again.

To meet Yukie again and then leave her behind.

It'd be too painful.

Daniel would've fought tooth and nail if anyone had tried to ship him off the day or two after his Dad had died. He couldn't ask Mr. Miyagi to do that.

The worker gave him his ice cream and he walked over towards where Kumiko and Johnny sat.

Johnny looked surprised. "I don't have-"

"My treat," Daniel said pushing a cone into his hand and sinking down next to him, pressing in close. He hooked his arm around the back of the booth behind Johnny. "But don't thank me, Kumiko said we had to try the salt flavor."

"Salt?" Johnny asked.

"Yes!" she said with a grin. "It's very popular. Actually salt is a big thing here. We have 150 different types of it."

"150? I thought there was only one type of salt. Table salt," Daniel said with a frown.

From a quick glance at Johnny, it looked like he also was struggling with the idea.

"We also flavor it. So you can get something like chocolate salt," she said with a smile. "But this is just basic salt ice cream. Try it! It's delicious!"

Daniel still had some reservations but Johnny was digging in, his tongue dragging across the ice cream, head tilted slightly for a better angle and he looked like he liked it.

Daniel felt something cold on his hands and realized his ice cream was melting.

His heart was pounding in his ears. He had to stomp down the desire to lean over and kiss Johnny, to feel that tongue on his own again, thinking about how it might feel elsewhere.

He had to look away or else he'd make a mistake. He'd make a fool of himself in front of Kumiko and in public and now was not the time or place.

He ate his ice cream. It worked. It was delicious. Salty and sweet. Delightfully cold.

Kumiko was talking about something but Daniel couldn't focus. It took a while longer to get calm again than he'd expected.

The whole trip he felt unbalanced. Like he'd tripped on the way off the plane and was still hopping, trying not to fall flat on his face.

It was only in the mornings or evenings when he was practicing that he felt grounded.

Johnny was talking softly at his side and Daniel wanted to listen. Tried to focus. He was talking about snow. About going into the mountains a couple of times of a year to snowboard with his friends. Was talking about his friends fondly. What they wanted to do, the ones that knew.

They'd finished their ice cream and looked ready to go, ready to take the conversation on the road.

"What do you wanna do? What are your dreams?" Daniel asked Kumiko.

"Okay, I'll show you my dream," she said leading them across the street and to a window display with TVs in it, motioning to the woman behind them to change the channel.

Daniel tried guessing what she wanted to do. Each guess was wrong and Kumiko laughed at each silly guess like she was finally starting to understand his jokes.

Soft classical music played and the laughter ended and Kumiko pointed.

"No, there," she said.

A ballerina was dancing on the screen.

"That is my dream," she spoke in awe of a dream that seemed out of reach. Daniel wondered why asked where she was studying.

"No schools for this kind of dancing in Okinawa."

No wonder she sounded so sad. Her dream was out of reach. Unless she could go elsewhere.

He wondered if they could take Kumiko home with them. There were so many dance studios in LA. He was sure the guys would know of a good one or would be able to find her a good one. She could use it like a study abroad. She would become a famous dancer one day and they could go to her shows, cheer her on from the audience, throw flowers at her when she came out to take her bow.

He turned hearing someone calling Kumiko's name, pressing a flyer into her hand.

"Come to the dance tonight, oh bring your friends," the guy said after

taking Johnny and Daniel in with a smile.

He darted back off into the crowd with his flyers to pass more out as Kumiko looked at them. "Like to go to dance?"

But Daniel had caught sight of something across the street that made his veins fill with ice.

He mumbled something about Sato's dojo, about needing to see it.

He heard Kumiko's warnings about Chozen but he had to see it.

He had to know what Sato's dojo looked like.

The dojo of a man who was destroying his own sensei's life. Who'd chased off his best friend over 40 years ago.

A man who sold off parts of his heritage, who sold away all the fish in the sea, who made the villagers rent land from him to sell their vegetables, a man who took a defensive karate taught from father to son and taught it the military service members from the USA after a terrible war had ended. A man whose greed seemed to know no bounds.

Would it be like the Cobra Kai dojo? Mats on the floor, mirrored walls, and trophies in cases everywhere? Would there be a cardboard cutout of Sato like there had been of Kreese? What did the fighting style look like? A warped corrupted version of Mr. Miyagi's karate?

He walked up to the window and watched as Chozen taught, had four men attack him at once, one holding his hands behind his back and he quickly knocked them all out.

Daniel felt his heart sink.

How were they going to win against that? If Chozen wanted to kill him he'd have to fight with everything he had.

He'd have to master the drum technique.

He turned to Kumiko. "He's not bad."

"He's Sato's number-one student."

Daniel turned to look at Johnny who was looking into the studio, watching. He wondered if Johnny could do that. If that was something Kreese had taught him. How to fight groups of people with his hands

behind his back. Or maybe he'd learned how to take those styles of hits early on. As a kid.

It had been a bad idea, he realized suddenly. To try and do some investigation, to try and see Sato's dojo and watch Chozen teach.

Johnny too had been a bad man's number one student.

He reached out grabbing Johnny's hand, pulling him away from the window, away from Sato's dojo.

It wasn't the same. But it was close enough to worry Daniel about where Johnny's head would go.

Johnny came along, hesitating only a moment, before following Daniel, not pulling his hand away as Kumiko led them down one of the pedestrian market streets in Naha and away from Sato's dojo and Chozen.

Away from danger.

Breaking Ice

The marketplace was crowded and full of souvenirs and clothes. Kumiko pulled them into a shop full of what looked an awful lot like the same style shirt that Chozen always wore.

"They look like Hawaiian shirts," Daniel said.

"Kariyushi shirts," Kumiko said with a smile, she grabbed one off the rack and held it up to Johnny, studying it and looking from it up at him than shaking her head and putting it back.

"Oh! these ones are bashofu!" she said feeling the fabric between her fingers.

"What's that?" Daniel asked.

"The fabric is made from banana plants," she said with a smile. "We've been doing it since the days of the old kings. Before Japan. Before USA. We actually have a lot of traditional textiles...let's see," she hummed walking past to another section looking around.

She grabbed one again and held it up to Daniel and then nodded her approval before looking around some more, glancing from the rack to Johnny. "I think we'll do bingata style. It's more colorful."

She studied it for a moment, picked one, and draped it over her arm.

"This is very nice Kumiko, but-" Johnny started.

He couldn't afford the shirt she'd picked out for him. He couldn't afford anything anymore. Maybe a single postcard was about it. She looked so excited, he felt bad.

"No no," Kumiko said waving Johnny off. "Gift, hmm? Besides, I'll get a better deal than you," she said confidently walking over to the seller, talking to her rapidly in Okinawan.

Johnny felt a little at loss. He didn't know how to repay her. But she did indeed get a better deal from the looks of it and the big smile on her face, heading towards them with her bag of shirts.

She looked down at the flyer, still in her hand that she'd been given by her friend thoughtfully. "Fifties style. Hmm. Let me think where we can find that."

She hooked her arms through Johnny's and Daniel's and pulled them back out into the busy marketplace, walking in and out of different shops, talking to the owners asking for what she was looking for.

It was nice to look at everything, it was all so different from what he was used to. It was a maze. He tried remembering. He usually was fairly good about direction, navigating unfamiliar places, but he had no clue where they were in the marketplace or how to get back to where they'd been if he got lost.

But Daniel held his hand and Kumiko pulled the both of them along, checking back to make sure they were still with her every once in a while, talking about the market and one shop or another having the best of something. About that one had a cat that everyone liked to visit and sure enough there was the cat and they stopped to watch it sleep amongst the wares completely uncaring of them being so close. She pointed out little souvenirs, explained which ones were popular and why going through the history of everything.

Then she was talking about dance. Her eyes lit up about it as she looked through stores, keeping the conversation going in between conversations with the shop owners. Telling them about the different dances they hosted some times in Naha and how it was different than the ones she did for o-bon. She talked about teaching the kids, how their parents trusted her to make sure they knew what they were doing and how it was hard but rewarding because it was dance and not everyone got to find jobs similar to their dreams, even though it wasn't exactly her dream. Daniel asked her questions, soaking up everything she said.

Johnny wished he had more money. If he hadn't spent it all getting them there, he could set up a scholarship or something for her so she could study somewhere and join a troupe. All he could do however was carry her bags.

She told them she was getting really good deals on her shopping and not to worry. She'd bought a poodle skirt and something for her hair. Her costume was put together. She was looking for something for them now. Looking through button-up bowling shirts and leather jackets.

"Aha!" she said pulling out a black one. She took the bags out of Johnny's hands and handed them to Daniel. "Try this one," Kumiko said pushing it into his hands.

Johnny could not afford a black leather jacket and he doubted it'd fit. His shoulders were broader than most people he'd seen around, other than the service members and he hadn't seen many of them in the marketplace.

But Kumiko was looking at him expectantly, eyes all bright.

So he tried it on. It fit.

She clapped her hands delighted. A guy walked over, the shop owner, and leaned against the rack of clothes talking to Kumiko.

Daniel walked up to him, shifting the bags in his arms and reaching up to fix his collar.

"It does look nice," Daniel said quietly, thoughtful. "Do you actually want to go to this dance?" he asked.

Johnny looked up, past Daniel at Kumiko, she was laughing at something the salesperson was saying and then back at Daniel whose hands were on the edges of the jacket.

"She's spent all day showing us around, taking time to play tour guide for free for us. She likes to dance. I think we owe her, to take her out and make sure she has fun. Make her feel like a princess, you know?"

Daniel's head was tilted, studying him, mulling it over.

"It's the least we can do," Johnny said. "I know how to dance, do you?"

Daniel laughed. "I've been my Ma's dance partner for years, I can *definitely* dance." The statement was delivered as if Johnny has issued him a challenge on par with asking if he knew how to cook Italian food.

"Then we have nothing to worry about. We'll give her a night to remember," Johnny said softly.

He knew how to be a gentleman, had taken plenty of girls out dancing at Sid's request over the years, before Ali. Had spent his middle school years as an escort for girls doing cotillion at the country club. The parents loved it. Where all the focus was on them and he was just an accessory.

This would be different, but he could still dance. And he'd make sure Kumiko had fun. It was the best thing he could do to thank her for

everything. Even if he didn't leave with the jacket. He'd find something. He had some jeans in his bag, he could roll up the bottoms and put on a plain t-shirt and it'd be the same, almost.

Kumiko walked back to them with a big grin on her face. "Okay!" she said holding out a bag. "Got a huge sale! You can wear this tonight."

Johnny took off the jacket and stared at her in surprise.

She smiled at him. "Don't worry," she said. "We'll have lots of fun."

She took the jacket and put it in one of the bags with everything else and Johnny took them back from Daniel and her. She hooked her arm through Daniel's. "All that's left is to find something for you."

"I don't need anything, it's fine." Daniel protested.

"Must look nice for dancing," she said with a big smile.

Johnny followed them through the crowd for a bit.

He let his pace slow. It was almost like a date. If he just stopped walking it could be one. If he just let himself disappear into the crowd they could continue their date without him. He could find Mr. Miyagi who was supposed to be in Naha getting a replacement part for the fridge and he'd see them later.

He wondered if he could return the jacket. But it was a gift and he wanted to go. He hadn't danced for fun in...a long time and he was curious what a fifties-themed dance in Okinawa would look like.

He stopped walking.

They turned the corner.

There was a statue. One of those he saw a lot and hadn't had a chance to see it up close. He wandered over. He studied the carving in the stone. It was an animal he just couldn't decide what kind of creature it was. What it was supposed to be.

"It's a *Shīsā."*

Johnny turned. The damn island really was too small. Driving had made it seem like it was vast.

"There's always two of them," Chozen said pointing to the other on the other side of the path. "This one," he tapped the stone of the *Shīsā* they

stood in front of, "is to keep bad things away." He motioned again to the other "And that one's to keep good things in."

Clearly, it wasn't working.

Chozen shoved his hands in his pockets. He was wearing a white shirt with a red and black pattern. "So where's the coward and the baby?"

Johnny frowned, he thought they'd cleared up the coward thing.

"Daniel is actually older than me."

Chozen blinked in surprise and then laughed. "So you're baby?"

"He's stronger than he looks."

"Uh-huh, sure. Tell me, why do you call that coward sensei? He didn't teach you for this," Chozen said reaching out and squeezing Johnny's bicep. "No way a coward taught you."

"Mr. Miyagi saved my life," Johnny said. "He's no coward. He gave me a bonsai. He's been there when I needed him, and he's teaching me what I need to learn."

"A bonsai," Chozen said with a laugh. "I could get you a bonsai, would you call *me* sensei then? Is it that easy?"

Johnny sighed, he'd just completely brushed over the saved his life part. Only hearing what he wanted. "I'm *lucky* to have him be my teacher."

"Yet you hand out the title sensei so easily. I heard you gave it to a child. A little girl. If a little girl could be your sensei then I for sure could be your sensei."

"What could you even teach me?" Johnny asked.

Chozen's fingers were digging into his arm, a challenge he was sure. But Johnny didn't think he'd fight out in the open like this. Johnny wouldn't have.

"So many things," Chozen said. "Come to my dojo and I'll show you."

"Isn't it your *uncle's* dojo?"

"He's rarely there, it's practically mine. I teach men stronger than you all the time. They're always so ready to learn, to work hard, they call

me sensei because I earned it. Because I mastered something and have courage. I do not run away from fights and my students don't either. You don't look like you'd run," Chozen said standing tall, getting into Johnny's space.

"Oh I run," Johnny said. "I run all the time."

Chozen laughed. "I mean from a fight. I want to see how you'd fight. What your *last* sensei taught you."

"He wasn't honorable. He doesn't deserve that title."

"And a girl and a coward do?"

"Yuna was teaching me how to play the sanshin. Mr. Miyagi is teaching me karate and how to fix things."

Chozen looked thoughtful for a moment before, "Your sensei's time is running out. Jump ship before it sinks with you on it."

"How would that be honorable? Wouldn't that be cowardly?"

How did he not hear himself? How did he not realize nothing he said made sense? Was he that twisted up? Had Johnny been?

Chozen frowned shaking his head. "You've picked the wrong side."

"You just don't know them. You're too...angry," Johnny said. When he'd been angry it'd been so hard to see fact instead of fiction. It felt like the whole world was against him. "Right? Like everything is shifting under your feet and changing and you just wanted everything to stay the same? Life changes and you've got to adapt, if you stay angry, Chozen you *will* destroy yourself. It'll burn you up."

Chozen laughed, "Don't worry about me baby, but come to the dojo if you change your mind. I'll give you a *real* lesson in the Miyagi style karate."

He walked away back into the crowd and Johnny frowned. It never seemed to get through. But people only heard what they wanted to hear.

He should've told Chozen to leave Daniel alone. Should've tried to be a little more intimidating.

But he was trying to keep his promise. To follow the Miyagi-do rules. Not to start fights.

He didn't want to let Mr. Miyagi down. He didn't want to fight.

He looked through the crowd trying to remember which way Daniel and Kumiko had gone down. He remembered a bit and headed in that way.

He saw Daniel through the crowd, hopping up trying to catch sight of something through the crowd, he was facing the other way. But it was easy to pick him out of the crowd.

Johnny walked up to him and then stopped.

"What are you looking for?" Johnny asked.

"A tall blonde idiot that got lost in the crowd," Daniel said stopping his jumping and turning towards Johnny with a frown. He smacked Johnny' on the arm, "What even happened? You were right behind us and then you weren't, didn't we already talk about this in New York? Do I seriously have to hold your hand every second?"

Johnny wanted to say yes. Wanted to always be by his side. But one day Daniel would pull away and he'd have to let him.

"I'm sorry for worrying you."

Daniel held out his hand. He looked angry. The way he thrust his hand out between them palm up.

"I should've told Kumiko that you do this. You worried her too you know," he said sourly.

"I'll apologize to her too," Johnny said holding his hand over Daniel's, hovering, hesitating.

If Daniel knew would he be so willing to hold his hand? If he knew that Johnny liked him more than a friend? It felt like he was taking advantage of Daniel's friendly actions. Maybe sharing a bed with him was also too much. Torturing himself by being a wolf pretending to be a sheep. Daniel let out a huff of air and caught Johnny's hesitating hand in his own.

"I swear-" Daniel sighed sounding almost like Bobby for a second, enough to make Johnny homesick and amused at the same time. "Listen, I don't know why you're pulling away, but stop it. Everything is fine. Okay? I mean it."

Daniel turned and pulled Johnny along towards where Kumiko was coming out of a shop. She had another bag on her wrist and she looked up at him with a look so full of relief that Johnny felt awful.

"I'm sorry, I wanted to look at the *Shīsā*. It's not a good excuse, I'm sorry for worrying you."

Daniel's hand tightened around his.

"I should've mentioned he's a flight risk," Daniel said with a sigh. "No matter where we go I lose him at least once."

Daniel looked up at him with a frown, brows knit, "Is it out of your system now? I don't want to make this a habit. Okay? I'm going to have to get you one of this kid leash backpacks if this keeps up."

"Kid leash backpacks?" Kumiko asked curious and confused.

Johnny looked at him horrified. It wouldn't happen. He would run for the hills.

Daniel laughed. "It's for parents whose kids keep wandering off."

"Ah," Kumiko said like she understood, but her brows were still knit in confusion.

She hooked her arm through Johnny's on the other side, tight. They walked together out of the market and back into the busy street. They stopped by Kumiko's white car and put their shopping in the trunk, before continuing on down the street.

"Maybe we'll run into Mr. Miyagi out here," Daniel said.

"Oh. Why would he be here?"

"He said he had to come into town to get a part for his refrigerator or something."

"Oh, I know that store. It's right around the corner."

There was a shop they were getting near with a lot of noise coming out of it. Daniel slowed bringing their group to a standstill. He clearly wanted to go in.

Kumiko clearly didn't from the way she was gently trying to pull Johnny away from the place, to keep going to where Mr. Miyagi surely was.

But Daniel was going in, was pulling Johnny in, which meant they all were going.

They made their way through the loud crowd. Johnny spotted one of Chozen's friends catch sight of them and leave through the door while Daniel was taking it all in.

Johnny frowned.

This wasn't going to go well.

They should leave, should heed Kumiko's advice.

That guy was going to bring Chozen and then who knew what would happen.

A bar fight?

It had the atmosphere of a bar.

And if Chozen taught all the service members in town who wanted to learn how to fight they wouldn't get any sympathy.

They'd pick Chozen's side.

They'd be outnumbered.

They found their way to a table with a wooden platform with slots in it full of sheets of ice. They watched a guy slam his hand into one, shattering it and then bouncing away wincing and holding his hand.

It was like breaking boards, but ice instead. But he did it wrong.

The next guy who went up was all hyped up. Ready for brute force, standing wrong and unfocused.

Kumiko was standing behind them, holding onto their shirts like she was trying to pull them away but almost too scared to move.

Daniel's eyes flicked over the guy readying himself to go. Everyone was making bets.

"This guy's standing wrong," Daniel said turning to tell Kumiko.

Did Daniel not realize they were right next to the guy? Did he not realize that they were in a bar full of military guys and they were all drunk in the middle of the afternoon? Blowing off steam and Daniel

was telling them they were standing wrong.

Johnny moved, stepping in front of Daniel. Daniel kept talking. The guy hit more of the ice than the first one. But Daniel wouldn't stop talking.

Now of all times he couldn't stop. Couldn't get him to talk most of the trip. In weird moments where he just stared. But now?

The guy heard him. Was whirling around, ready to see if Daniel could put money where his mouth was. Then there was Chozen rushing towards them like a bull blocking their exit with his friends. The crowd wouldn't let them leave. Not without a fight. Not easily. While they were focused on Daniel, Kumiko slipped out through the crowd.

"I'll do it, leave Daniel alone," Johnny said.

"No no, he's the one who seems to know best, he's the one to try it," Chozen said smiling darkly down at Daniel.

Like a cat toying with a mouse.

If Daniel messed up he could break his hand.

If he wasn't ready, he could shatter the bones.

But Daniel was smart. He always knew what he was talking about. No matter how worried Johnny was, no matter how thrown Daniel probably was by Chozen's sudden appearance

Daniel would know what to do. It was basic board breaking. Just a little different. With a twist.

Daniel was telling Chozen he wouldn't do it. He was trying to avoid confrontation. Trying to avoid a fight. The way they promised they would. To try and stay safe. Probably catching that look in Chozen's eye, that this wouldn't go well.

If Daniel lost he'd be hurt.

If he won Chozen would be more pissed.

"You have a choice, broken ice or broken neck."

"How is that a choice?" Johnny asked, trying to step between them, to get Daniel some breathing room. "Neither of those is a good option."

Chozen didn't look at him, staring at Daniel, not letting Johnny get between them. "This doesn't concern you baby."

Daniel glared up at Chozen. He looked pissed.

"He's got to break all three right?" someone asked.

Everyone was taking bets. Betting against Daniel because of his small frame. If Johnny had money he'd put it on Daniel winning.

"Wrong!" Chozen said hand shooting out to point at the person who was in charge of the bets. "All *six*," he said slowly like it was the best idea he'd ever had.

Daniel looked at the ice, calculating as the bets were being collected.

Johnny wondered if he should try and grab Daniel and run. He could hide Daniel behind him.

"All bets in," the man called while Chozen laughed.

"Not all bets. Not yet," Mr. Miyagi said coming through the crowd followed by Yukie and Kumiko.

Chozen stood out of the way for him. Almost like he held *some* respect despite how much he talked. But he still was looking down at the two angrily. Still in a fighting bull mode.

Daniel smiled at Mr. Miyagi, shoulders relaxing totally relieved to see him. "Boy, am I glad to see you here."

"No worry nothing. Miyagi fix everything." Mr. Miyagi said softly.

He shifted slightly between Chozen and Daniel now that there was space, following where Chozen had moved. Chozen wouldn't have a clear shot anymore and some of the tension left Johnny as well.

"What odds?" Mr. Miyagi asked looking around.

"Three to one he does not make through ice," Chozen said sounding too pleased with himself.

"How many pieces?"

"Six."

Daniel dropped his voice to a whisper, jerking his head to the door,

recommending they leave.

It made sense, Mr. Miyagi didn't fight. Kumiko had said this was a bad place. Mr. Miyagi would surely walk them out. But there'd been something about saying he was going to place a bet that gave Johnny pause. Reminded him of Mr. Miyagi at the Cobra Kai dojo looking up at the All-Valley tournament poster and recommending they have a truce till then. Make everything fairer.

Mr. Miyagi knew how to swerve from what you expected to do.

Mr. Miyagi pulled out a thick pile of bills and held it up as he spoke, looking Daniel in the eyes as he did so.

"$600 say he breaks all six," Mr. Miyagi said.

It was that faith he had in Daniel like last time. Like all the times before that Daniel could do things Daniel wasn't sure of. But this time Johnny had a feeling Mr. Miyagi was right. Daniel knew how to stand, knew all the basics of what to do, had watched those before him fail. Daniel was stronger and smarter than people thought and maybe even more than he knew.

"I cannot cover that," Chozen said.

"You are covered," Sato said walking in.

Why was this island like this? It was bigger than a person would think and yet they were always tripping over one another. Always running into one another. Like magnets, only Johnny desperately wished for more space. For everything to be different.

Daniel also looked horrified. But Johnny knew if he could've he would've done the same thing. Put all his bets on Daniel.

Yukie came over with Kumiko and they stood next to Johnny. Kumiko looked so nervous and clung to his side. He gently patted her shoulder.

"It'll be fine."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"You know how we looked in the dojo and saw Chozen fighting? How it showed off how he knew what he could do? Strategy?"

"Yeah."

"This is like that. But for Daniel. He doesn't really like fighting. He likes karate, he likes studying it. And he knows everything he needs to do."

"But the other guy was bigger and he couldn't."

"The difference is Daniel," Johnny said smiling at her. "He's smart and much stronger than he looks. Besides does Mr. Miyagi look nervous?"

"No."

"Then we shouldn't be either right?"

They watched Daniel walk up to the ice with Mr. Miyagi, how he took a moment to breathe, to center himself, the way he stood. It was the right stance, the form was correct, as long as his movements were confident he'd be fine.

He moved fast, a quick strike with a shout and his hand went through all six sheets of ice.

The ladies on either side of Johnny let out cries of joy, squeezing his arms.

Johnny watched Daniel, the look of surprise and delight on his face, surprised that he'd done it. Like he underestimated himself, underestimate his strength and his knowledge. His hand found Johnny's and he gripped it warmly.

A look of *did you see me?*

Of course he had, Johnny hadn't taken his eyes off of him.

He followed them to collect Mr. Miyagi's winnings and to head out the door.

The problem was if this would be like throwing oil on a fire.

Winning would be seen as a slight. Even though Daniel had been backed into a corner, not allowed out except to do as was requested. By doing it, and not only doing it well but by winning money out of it...it would be like a thorn for Chozen and Sato.

It would make them angrier.

Even though it wasn't something Daniel had asked for. He hadn't wanted to do it. Had just been curious. Had just talked. And it got him

into trouble.

There would've been no winning. And even though Daniel looked so happy, Johnny knew it'd been like poking a bear.

Chozen and Sato wouldn't realize it. Wouldn't take a break to notice that the anger there had been their own doing.

They'd fight back, it'd be worse.

Daniel grabbed Johnny's hand, pulling him towards the door of the bar where Johnny had hesitated, wondering if he could break through to them, to tell them to change course before things got worse.

He'd glanced back at Sato staring straight ahead upset in just the barest tic of his jaw and Chozen looking pissed.

Daniel was talking a mile a minute to Mr. Miyagi as they stepped out into the sunlight. Mr. Miyagi handed a large wad of the cash over to Daniel with a warm smile.

Johnny heard fast footsteps behind them and turned. Chozen looked like he had a thousand things to say but looked so pissed that he couldn't get a single one of them out.

Johnny realized there was nothing he *could* say. Chozen was too pissed. Anything would lead to a fight.

He turned to notice that Daniel and Kumiko aware of the danger but not worried. Both of them looked at Johnny and hooked their arms through his pulling him along towards the Chinese food that Mr. Miyagi said they'd get for dinner with the winnings.

"Hey Daniel," Johnny said. He had to say something before the day got too far gone from them.

"Hmm?" Daniel asked as they crossed the street.

"That was really cool."

Daniel looked up at him and grinned. He looked so damn happy, so pleased that Johnny for a moment could bask in the warmth of it and ignore the storm cloud he knew was brewing.

An Island Both Big and Too Small

The sun stayed up so late in Okinawa in the summer. After a dinner in Naha they rode back in the two cars to Tomi Village and Daniel felt great. The sun was shining and the skies were clear and blue.

It was almost like winning the All-Valley again. With the odds stacked against him and surprising everyone including himself. But this time they'd won money and Mr. Miyagi had split it with him and he hadn't had to fight anyone. Just ice. He'd done more than all those big military guys. Guys who could barely break one or two.

And Johnny. Johnny told him he'd been cool. *Johnny*. The epitome of a cool guy.

He wanted to remember this day for the rest of his life. He'd learned a new trick he could do, wondered if he could replicate it again back home. Impress his mother and the guys.

He went to the dojo after they got back to study the pictures of the Miyagi's past on the walls. That jubilant feeling dissipating.

He wondered if they taught the way Mr. Miyagi did. What did people do before cars? What was there to clean in the same way? Windows?

He wondered if they would be as worried as he was for Mr. Miyagi.

They were running out of time and Mr. Miyagi had made no move to get them going, to get them home. That deadline would fall on them and it was going to be awful. No amount of cool ice breaking would save them.

He wished all these old Miyagi teachers could tell him what to do. How to help Mr. Miyagi.

"Oh, Daniel-san, I thought you have date," Mr. Miyagi said slipping out of his shoes at the door.

"Yeah I was just waiting for Kumiko," Daniel said turning.

She'd promised to bring him the thing she'd bought for him while he was out looking for Johnny.

Mr. Miyagi's smile faltered for a moment, just ever so brief that Daniel almost didn't notice.

He didn't think about it as Kumiko appeared with his shirt for the dance, and before he knew it he was back in Kumiko's car wearing it, worrying about Mr. Miyagi, worrying about the fact Mr. Miyagi had told Chozen he was a farmer, worrying about the destroyed garden, the end of his time of mourning.

He leaned against Johnny who was wearing a soft t-shirt under the black leather jacket with his jeans that he'd rolled the cuffs up on.

He hoped Johnny could keep Kumiko happy because he felt awful. All the good had been sucked out by worry.

Kumiko was dressed in a poodle-style skirt with snowflakes on it and a white collared short sleeve shirt and looked so happy. Daniel wanted to be happy with her but he just couldn't.

"Could you dance with her first?" Daniel asked Johnny quietly when they walked into the dance club. "I need a moment."

"Yeah. But you sure?" Johnny asked.

Daniel nodded giving Kumiko a weak smile. "Johnny's going to be your first dance if that's okay."

She nodded, grinned up at Johnny, grabbing his hand and darting into the crowd. They moved across the floor and Daniel leaned against one of the walls.

Johnny was light on his feet, spinning Kumiko around. She was laughing. Having a blast. And Johnny looked charming, made it look easy.

Daniel got himself a soda.

He thought it'd bother him, watching them dance.

But it wasn't like school with all the girls. Johnny made it sound like it was their *duty* to dance with Kumiko and show her a good time.

They were friends. Becoming good friends. Johnny needed all of those he could get.

And she *knew*. She knew Daniel liked Johnny. Had caught on so fast it was almost suspicious. Though Daniel didn't know how.

Maybe he just couldn't hide his feelings as well as he thought.

His mother knew after all. Had noticed almost immediately but hadn't said anything.

Which just meant the only one it wasn't obvious to was the most important person and he didn't know how he felt about that.

Johnny's eyes met his from across the room.

A check-in.

He'd been doing that a lot since they got in Okinawa. Searching for Daniel, catching his eyes and raising an eyebrow, a quick check.

A quick and wordless *you okay?*

He wondered how he did that. Knew how to check in with someone from across the room. It was so easy to read, so easy to know it was for him. All that concern.

Daniel raised his soda in cheers and gave him a nod.

Johnny could dance. He knew that. Had seen him with Ali. But that had been basic. Simple.

This had more moves. He was keeping up with Kumiko and it was impressive.

Daniel wanted to take Johnny dancing somewhere where the two of them could dance. He thought maybe Johnny would be the easiest dance partner he'd ever had.

He already studied him every moment he could. He was sure that that'd translate well to dancing.

Kumiko really was a dancer. As couples moved around the floor none danced quite like her. And all tired much faster than she did.

Daniel caught a slight shift in Johnny's shoulders. He was starting to tire. But he'd keep dancing with her as long as she wanted. It was just how he'd been trained. It soured something in Daniel's stomach.

He'd finished his drink and hurried out to trade and let him rest.

He walked quickly across the floor catching Johnny's eyes and nodding holding his hands out ready.

Johnny spun Kumiko across the floor straight into Daniel's arms.

"Hope you don't mind," he said with a small smile.

She was so happy, it was infectious and Daniel liked dancing. Liked looking out and catching Johnny's eye from across the room, showing off. Maybe he needed to blow off some steam and maybe this was perfect.

He felt better moving to the music.

He liked knowing Johnny was watching him. Every time he looked out for him he was there, sitting and watching, blue eyes on him, like he was the only one worth watching in the place and it made him happy.

Gave him hope that things like this worked. Maybe a day like this where they'd had fun and he'd broken ice and showed off, where he got to dance was better than taking Johnny out on dates in California or New York. Maybe it was clearer.

He didn't know. But he hoped. And it was nice to have hope after what had felt like a hopeless couple of days.

When Kumiko finally tired they walked towards where Johnny was sitting.

"Feeling better?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah, much," Daniel said.

"You guys want drinks?" Johnny asked.

"Yes, please," Kumiko said.

Daniel grabbed Johnny's arm pressing some cash from his wallet into his hand. He half expected Johnny to fight him about it. It looked like he was about to, and then he didn't.

"What do you guys want?" Johnny asked.

"Melon soda," Kumiko said with a smile.

"I'll have what she's having," Daniel said smiling at him, so tired but finally relaxed.

Johnny nodded walking off to go get their drinks.

He wondered if maybe when they went back out on the floor if he

could get the courage up to ask Johnny to dance. If he acted casual about it. Acted like it was the most normal thing in the world and not something that made him feel weak in the knees.

"Are you going to ask him to dance?" Kumiko asked leaning forward, voice low and conspiratorial.

"Thinking about it," Daniel said.

"He's a very good dancer," Kumiko said with a smile.

"Yeah? Better than me?" Daniel asked, teasing.

"Different," Kumiko said with an amused smile. "You have different styles, but they're both very fun."

Daniel sighed letting his hand fall to the table between them. "If only it was that easy."

"Could be, if you just ask. You won't know *unless* you ask."

"Okay, yeah, you're right," Daniel said sitting up a little taller. "I'll ask."

A beer bottle slammed onto their table making them jump.

Daniel looked up feeling his heart sink. It was Chozen. What the hell? He'd seen Chozen three or maybe four times that day. It was like a damn curse. Why wouldn't he just leave them alone?

He looked too at ease. Too pleased with himself. He had something slung over his shoulder.

"Hey," Kumiko said standing up. "That's Johnny's jacket."

Daniel looked again. He was holding it over his shoulder like a prize.

"What did you do to Johnny?" Daniel asked worry and panic flooding through his veins.

Chozen grinned grabbing Daniel's shirt and hauling him up, across the floor, and slamming him into a wall.

"We made a trade," Chozen said with a grin. "I promised I wouldn't kill you today. I didn't *however* promise not to take back my money."

"Did you hurt him?" Daniel asked between gritted teeth.

"Tell me, why does he hang out with you? What's so interesting?"

"Did you hurt him?" Daniel asked again.

His patience was fleeing.

"Barely touched him," Chozen said.

Daniel didn't like that.

He tried to see past Chozen, out into the dance hall to see if he could make out Johnny.

He felt like if there'd been a fight he would've heard it. But Daniel hadn't seen Johnny fight since the All-Valley. Not since *they'd* fought.

He worried that Johnny wouldn't fight back. Wouldn't defend himself. And that that promise he'd made Johnny make would hold him back.

He worried they would've just crowded in, hit him, and walked away, like they always did to Daniel.

Chozen stepped back. One of his friends had grabbed Kumiko and covered her mouth so no one would hear her shouts.

His other friend landed a hit to Daniel's abdomen while he was distracted, worried about her.

"Don't worry we'll take your friends home," Chozen said taking Daniel's wallet and removing all the cash, tossing it to the floor.

He laughed, counting his money.

Daniel only had a moment. He could take the cheapest shot of his whole life and then he'd have to get Kumiko free and they'd have to run. They'd have to find Johnny fast.

Chozen was distracted, wasn't on guard. He never seemed to expect Daniel to do anything.

Daniel was sick of it. Tired of Chozen. Tired of his friends ruining his days, his nights. He didn't want to see him anymore.

He picked up his wallet, curled his fingers into a fist, and struck.

Chozen crumpled to the ground and Daniel stood grabbing the money.

Kumiko slammed her foot on the guy holding her's foot.

Daniel hesitated only a moment.

He couldn't retrieve the jacket, it'd fallen under Chozen. It'd be too dangerous.

He'd have to try some other time to get that back.

He grabbed Kumiko's hand and ran.

"Look for Johnny. We've got to get him and run. Get your keys ready," Daniel said. "Chozen's going to be pissed. We don't want to be here when he gets back up."

"There!" Kumiko said pointing.

Daniel took off with her in that direction she'd pointed.

There was Johnny.

He was holding drinks, three bottles of cold soda and it looked like he'd been cornered by a group of women.

"Sorry ladies, we got to go and he's got to come with us. Pardon," Daniel said grabbing Johnny's hand and pulling him along.

He'd have to check later. To see if he'd been hurt. There wasn't time.

"What happened?" Johnny asked as they ran outside.

The sun had finally gone down and it was starting to cool off just a little.

"Chozen. He's pissed. Run," Daniel said spotting the car.

"What? But he said-"

"Yeah, I don't think we should trust anything he says."

"Maybe if we talk-"

"Johnny I punched him in the dick he's not going to want to talk," Daniel said letting go of Johnny's hand to hop over the back of the car and slide into the seat so he could pop the door open.

He looked back at Johnny, he could see Chozen running out of the

club, hand cupped between his legs and looking furious. Angrier than Daniel had ever seen.

Daniel grabbed Johnny's arm, pulling him in next to him, practically into his own lap, then leaning over, shutting the door.

Kumiko slammed her foot on the gas.

Johnny's hand was on Daniel's thigh, struggling to regain his balance from where he's been pulled into the car. But when Kumiko had floored it he'd fallen into Daniel. He was still cradling those three drinks to his chest and Daniel reached out, hooking his arm around his chest, holding him up before he face-planted into Daniel's lap or into Kumiko.

"You okay?" Daniel asked.

Johnny's face was so close to his as he tried to regain his balance. It would've been probably mean to point out to Johnny that he was so good at balance until he just wasn't. And it delightfully seemed every time Daniel was there ready to catch him.

He wanted to say something cheesy about falling for him that he was pretty sure would just completely miss the target and Kumiko would laugh and Johnny would just stare at him confused. If only it ever got through. He could be so smooth. But he'd already tried most of the traditional styles of flirting.

"Me? What about you two?" Johnny asked.

There was worry in his eyes, concern, as he pushed himself back with his one free hand to sit down next to Daniel.

"Kumiko stomped on the guy's foot," Daniel said throwing his arms along the back of the seat now that Johnny was settled.

"Wait they grabbed Kumiko?" Johnny asked, incredulous.

"And tried to take the winnings from Daniel," Kumiko said. "And so he got a good shot in."

"I got the money back, but I didn't get your jacket back," Daniel said with a sigh. "Why'd you give him your jacket?"

Johnny sighed settling the bottles in his arms and twisting off the caps and passing them down to Kumiko and Daniel.

"He asked what I was doing there by myself. I said I wasn't alone. He asked where you were because he had unfinished business. I told him to leave you alone. He asked what he'd get for leaving you alone. His hands were on the jacket so I said he could have the jacket if he left you alone. Should've known he couldn't keep his word. Kumiko I'm sorry for losing your jacket for nothing."

"It's okay, I'm just glad you're okay," Kumiko said taking a sip of her drink as she drove. "I was worried."

"Are you okay?" Johnny asked.

Kumiko grinned at him. "I got to dance tonight, nothing can ruin that. And I'm not hurt."

Daniel hooked his arm around Johnny's shoulder, feeling the soft fabric of his t-shirt beneath his arm, drinking the soda Johnny had gotten them.

"We're fine. But how about you? How are *you* feeling?"

Johnny sighed, a deep breath and he nodded. "Frustrated, but the important thing is your okay. You'd think with the number of times Chozen keeps getting stung that he'd learn to leave you alone. He keeps underestimating you."

Daniel grinned. "We're just going to have to stick with you from now on when you go off to get us drinks or food. Because for some reason that's always when Chozen chooses to strike."

"Right?" Johnny said with a sigh, leaning back against Daniel's arm. "Is he just watching until I walk away from you two to show up? Also how many times have we run into him today alone? Why is this island so big and small at the same time?"

"I was wondering the same thing myself," Daniel said amused, relieved that Johnny was okay.

"Is it always like this?" Johnny asked Kumiko.

"Not for me personally!" she said with a laugh. "It is usually very peaceful. But it's kind of exciting having you two here."

She seemed sincere about it. Now that the danger had passed. He wondered if he could use the money he'd won to buy her a ticket home with them. Wondered if he should offer.

"I hope we don't leave it in a mess for you," Johnny said.

"What do you mean?" Kumiko asked.

"I don't know if Chozen's the type, but I'm hoping he doesn't start picking on you because you hung out with us. After we leave."

"I won't let him," she said with a grin holding up her arm and flexing her bicep.

Daniel laughed.

"He doesn't fight fairly," Johnny said softly.

"Then I won't fight fairly either."

She sounded so sure of herself, so at ease.

Johnny nodded sipping his drink.

"So what were the ladies talking to you about?" Daniel asked.

"Oh, everyone asks if I'm part of one of the bases and then when I say I'm not they tend to be more excited. They wanted to know what we were doing and if we were having fun and were recommending things."

"They weren't asking you to dance?" Daniel asked a little surprised.

"No, but I think I got invited out to a couple of different things. I was given a bunch of business cards."

"You'll have to show me sometime," Kumiko said with a smile. "It might be fun to take them up on it. You look like a model, they might've thought you could model for them."

"Everyone wants to put you to work," Daniel said with a laugh.

"You think it was jobs?"

"You have a popular look," Kumiko said glancing at him warmly.

Johnny looked thoughtful as if he actually was contemplating getting a job in Okinawa.

Daniel leaned his head back and took in a deep breath.

The sky was full of stars. Outside the city, as they made their way down dirt country roads back to Tomi village it was so clear how many stars there were. Daniel tilted his head towards Johnny, giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"Hey, look up."

Johnny did.

"Wow," Johnny said in an almost breathless whisper.

"Yeah."

Daniel had never seen so many stars before while driving. He'd never had a convertible until recently. Hadn't even thought about it. Hadn't looked up the whole time they'd been on the island. It'd been cloudy most of the time threatening to rain.

"The sky is so clear," Daniel said.

"You don't have this back home?" Kumiko asked.

"Too much light pollution," Daniel said.

She pulled to a stop and Daniel dragged his eyes down. They were in the village outside of Miyagi's childhood home.

"Goodnight boys," she said with a smile. "Thanks for dancing with me."

"Of course," Daniel said.

"Thank you for showing us around all day," Johnny said smiling at her.

He turned to open the door, getting out, and held it open for Daniel who hopped out.

They walked through the gate, waving goodbye to Kumiko, and made their way to their room.

"Did you get injured again?" Johnny asked grabbing his stuff to go get ready for bed. To go take his bath.

"I got hit but it wasn't as bad this time, no need for any nursing this time," Daniel said smiling at him.

Johnny nodded.

"Good, okay," he said.

He turned to the door then paused looking back. "I know you can handle yourself. I know you're strong. I just can't seem to help but worry. It's one of the things I'm working on."

Daniel smiled softly. "You believe in me?"

Johnny's lips quirked into an amused smile. "Yeah. I do. I'll be back," he said heading off on bare feet towards the bath.

Daniel sunk against the walk to the floor with a big smile on his face. He couldn't stop smiling. The roller coaster of the trip was just constant with its highs and lows. And it'd been a good day overall. Despite Chozen. Despite Sato.

He took off the sparkly coat Kumiko had gotten him and smiled at it fondly. If only Johnny still had his jacket. It was the only real loss of the day.

Daniel had learned his lesson. He wouldn't keep all his money in one spot. He pulled his wallet out, separating some of the cash and sticking some of it at the bottom of his bag.

He hung up his jacket and laid down.

He bolted up hearing Sato yelling for Miyagi. He leaned over and opened the window, looking out.

Why? Why now? What was wrong with Sato? He'd waited 40 years, couldn't he wait another 40? Another day? Couldn't he just let Mr. Miyagi die of old age eons from now? And damn, there was Chozen. Seriously why couldn't they escape him? Why was he always there? Had they been right behind them on the road? Did Kumiko get home safely?

Daniel hopped up.

He'd have to try and warn Mr. Miyagi.

What if they found Yukie? Chozen hadn't seemed too likely to hold his hand around Kumiko, would they be the same around Yukie?

Why were they like this? Daniel couldn't handle it anymore. He was going to give them a piece of his mind. Ask them what the hell they were doing there in the middle of the night like some creeps.

He'd demand Chozen give him back Johnny's jacket if he didn't want to get hit again.

He hurried down the stairs turning on the light, pushing open the door, pissed.

Chozen's friends grabbed him and pinned his arms behind his back. He struggled against them, trying to break free. Surprised. But still too pissed to just stand there.

"Where's Miyagi?" Sato shouted as if Daniel wasn't right there.

"I don't know," Daniel said.

Sato looked angry and Daniel slammed his foot into one of the guy's feet but he twisted Daniel's arm harsher behind his back as Sato walked away. Chozen stood there holding a spear looking like he'd just been given the best news of his life..

"Come here. I want to show you something," Chozen said motioning towards Daniel with the spear.

Daniel was pushed forward and watched, struggling as Chozen took the spear and started trashing Miyagi's family dojo.

He came out with a big grin and Daniel was let go and pushed to the ground.

"Your sensei teach you how to fight with spear, huh?"

"No," Daniel said shaking his head, hands up ready to fight.

He heard footsteps.

"Too bad," Chozen said tossing the spear towards him.

Johnny caught it before Daniel did.

"I do," Johnny said holding the spear in his hands easily.

It looked like he'd almost made it into the bath. His hair was slightly wet, his skin looked wet, and he'd only bothered to put his pants back on, shirtless and barefoot.

"Does your word meaning nothing?" Johnny asked. "I thought you promised me you would leave Daniel alone."

"Promised not to kill *today*," Chozen said stepping into the dojo and grabbing another spear. "But now, after midnight, new day."

He flicked the spear in his hands looking too pleased.

"Johnny don't," Daniel said standing up.

He didn't like the way Chozen was looking, didn't like his body language. He was out for blood tonight.

Chozen laughed. "Your sensei only teaches cowards, come, show me what your last sensei taught you."

Johnny thrust the spear forward towards Chozen who blocked it.

"Isn't this your heritage you're destroying?" Johnny asked motioning towards the dojo with his head.

"Nothing of the cowards is related to me," Chozen said lunging forward.

Johnny parried.

"Without Miyagi you wouldn't know karate. You owe his kindness everything," Johnny said. "Just like me."

"He did not teach you this," Chozen said trying another stab from above that Johnny blocked pushing them back and into the damaged dojo.

"No, true. But this is the only time I've had ever had need to use this," Johnny said. "It's not usually useful."

Daniel wanted to follow, to continue watching, to try and figure out how to help, but Chozen's friends were trying to rip plants out of the garden. He rushed forward to try and stop them. There were two of them so one would fight him while the other destroyed the bonsai, throwing them through the shoji screens.

It was desperate fighting. Trying to stop them but making almost no progress. Only slowing down the amount of damage they could do.

"Enough," Mr. Miyagi said taking out the other one.

Chozen walked out of the dojo holding his spear. "Ah, the *coward*."

"Fight between Miyagi and uncle, not boys."

"Fight with *me*," Chozen said rushing forward.

Daniel scrambled out of the way as Miyagi caught the spear, kicked Chozen, and snapped it in half.

He saw Johnny in the doorway, breathing hard but looking okay, not bleeding. The panic that had welled up settled.

Chozen looked pissed but was the equal playing field seemed too much. He kicked over a stone lantern and left with his friends.

"You okay?" Johnny asked, he was holding his arm.

"Yeah," Daniel said. "What happened to your arm?" He looked closer, it looked wrong.

"It's nothing too bad, I just need to pop it back in place," Johnny said, he was so pale. "I'm just not sure where a sturdy enough place to do so is."

"Atatata," Mr. Miyagi said hurrying over. "No do self. We do. Wait a moment. Sit sit."

Mr. Miyagi turned to Daniel. "Yukie should be awake, go tell her."

Daniel nodded hurrying off to find Yukie. She was in the kitchen cleaning up broken pots. "Johnny's shoulder is dislocated, Mr. Miyagi said to come get you?"

Yukie looked at him in surprise and then nodded. She picked up a basket and put it in Daniel's hands and started filling it with things, walking down the hall and adding more before they headed back outside. His shoulder looked back to normal but Mr. Miyagi had his hand on Johnny's arm.

He looked up when they arrived.

"We make bath hmm?"

Yukie handed him an ice pack and some cloth.

They settled the ice onto his shoulder and made a sling that they set aside.

Johnny looked up at Daniel. With his good arm, he reached around in his pocket and pulled out a card.

"You mind calling Bobby for me? I promised I'd call every night. I don't want him to freak out. Tell him I'm fine. It's not that bad. He wrote his number on the card, like I'd ever forget it."

Daniel took it and hovered. He didn't want to leave Johnny. He still looked pale but Yukie and Mr. Miyagi were taking care of him.

He took the card and headed off to the phone. He read the instructions and dialed.

It rang once.

"Hey man, where the hell have you been? I got shit to do," Dutch said.

"I thought this was Bobby's number," Daniel said with a frown.

"Yeah, it is. But he had things to do today. So I'm phone sitting for this call. Daniel man where's Johnny? He okay? Why are you calling? *You* okay?"

Daniel sighed, leaning against the wall and sinking to the floor with the phone. "He's getting his shoulder taken care of. It dislocated."

"Did *you* dislocate his shoulder?"

"No! Chozen- did anyone tell you about what's going on?"

"Yeah Bobby's been giving us little briefings like every day. I know who Chozen is. What'd the bastard do this time?"

Daniel sighed and explained that Chozen had come by to trash the place on Sato's behalf to give Mr. Miyagi a message and how Johnny had run out and taken on Chozen. How he hadn't seen what had happened but that Chozen and his friends eventually fled after Mr. Miyagi appeared and then Johnny had been holding his arm.

His heart was still pounding. He couldn't calm down. He was too wound up. Too worried.

What if Chozen had killed Johnny? What if Mr. Miyagi hadn't come when he had?

"Hey man, you want us out there?" Dutch asked, voice breaking through the spiral. Soft and gentle.

"I-no, I think we're coming home soon," Daniel whispered. "I think

we'd miss each other."

"Well, you call this number when you know you're coming home and your flight info. We'll do something fun. And if you change your mind, let us know too okay? We can be there."

"Thanks," Daniel said softly.

"Don't worry too much about Johnny okay? Just talk to him and baby him if you're worried," Dutch said with a laugh. "Thanks for keeping an eye on him and letting me know. I'll pass the info along. You okay though Daniel?"

"Yeah just worried."

"Of course man. But you know, he's there, go bother him. You'll see if he's okay or not."

"Okay, uh thanks. Have a good day."

"Thanks, man, night."

Dutch hung up and Daniel put the phone back on the receiver.

He sighed standing up and walked back out to the yard.

Yukie and Mr. Miyagi had cleaned it up, moving things, and set up a big wooden tub full of hot steaming water.

Johnny was sitting in it with his back to Daniel. Yukie was setting out things on a table she'd brought out.

She looked at Daniel and smiled. She grabbed his arm and pulled him closer.

"Needs help, hmm? Be gentle," she said motioning to everything she'd set out. "Finish, put this on the shoulder and then ice and bandage. Don't let him use hurt arm, okay?"

Daniel nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

She smiled patting him gently on the shoulder. "I go help Miyagi sensei replant bonsai."

She left and Daniel walked quietly towards the wooden tub they'd set up.

The water was cloudy, milky, there were herbs or something in it. It looked like the baths his mom would make herself after a particularly rough day with the stuff one of the neighborhood ladies would give her.

He didn't know whether he was relieved or disappointed. A mix of both.

"They turning you into a soup?" Daniel asked amused.

Johnny jerked as if he hadn't noticed Daniel come up beside him and Daniel watched him flush bright red.

"Don't know. Mr. Miyagi said it'll help me heal faster. Yukie though might have been laughing as she made it. They were talking in Japanese, so I don't know-" he said.

"So what happened?" Daniel asked looking around at the stuff.

There was a chair, he pulled it over, behind Johnny. He recognized the soaps and shampoos from the bathroom. There was a pitcher of warm water. He scooted the chair back a bit more, coming up with a game plan.

"He slammed the spear into my shoulder," Johnny said. "And pop."

Daniel shuddered. "He didn't stab you?"

"No."

"Lean your head back okay?" Daniel said.

Johnny did as he asked, looking up at him.

"Close your eyes," Daniel said.

He didn't think he'd get soap in Johnny's eyes but he didn't want to chance it. He also wanted a reprieve. He was still all shaken up and didn't want Johnny to see it or that his hands were shaking.

He lifted the pitcher of warm water and ran it over Johnny's hair until it was all wet. He grabbed the shampoo and poured some into his hands and went to work shampooing Johnny's hair.

It was calming in the quiet of the garden with Johnny leaning his head back and eyes shut. Like moments ago it hadn't been full of Chozen and Sato demanding blood, destroying plants and bonsai and

history.

He breathed deeply.

Johnny looked peaceful, at ease, as if he hadn't just gotten into a fight with someone with a spear out to kill. Like he felt safe, like his guard was down, the way Daniel only usually saw while Johnny was asleep when he wasn't having nightmares.

He almost didn't want to break the spell, the quiet. But questions were bubbling up.

"Kreese taught you how to fight with a spear?"

"Yeah," Johnny said. He hadn't moved, nothing had changed. Still totally relaxed.

"I called and talked to Dutch instead of Bobby," Daniel said. "Told him what happened."

"Thanks."

He was speaking so softly. So quiet as Daniel ran his fingers through Johnny's hair for longer than he probably should've. Longer than necessary. Letting his fingernails gently run along Johnny's scalp, the way a good haircut was like. A massage almost.

He was so relieved that Johnny was okay. So relieved that he felt hot tears prick in his eyes as he looked down at him. He poured the warm water over Johnny's scalp, rinsing away the soap, and worked in the conditioner. He didn't want to think about what would've happened, what could've happened. Knew he was lucky.

He felt tears running down his cheeks and brushed them away with his arm.

There were just so many things he didn't understand and things he didn't have the energy to explore.

He wanted to go home. To be home with Johnny and Mr. Miyagi.

He wanted that daydream that he'd had only a few days ago. Living at Mr. Miyagi's with Johnny.

He'd thought about how to tell Johnny a thousand times.

He thought about walking with him along the beach at sunset with a

picnic. Then thought the wind would get sand in it and ruin it.

He thought about taking him to an amusement park. *Not Golf 'n stuff*. He thought about telling him, timing it with the nightly fireworks after a busy day.

He thought about going hiking and telling him after a swim near a waterfall.

But now...now he just wanted to tell him as soon as they got home. As soon as the danger was over. As soon as they were safe and out of reach from Sato and Chozen.

Blue eyes opened and looked at him. He felt a hand reach up and brush away tears. It was yet, so it didn't really help. Daniel almost laughed.

"Hey," Johnny said softly. "What's wrong?"

"I'm just relieved you're okay."

"There's nothing to worry about. I am okay."

"Close your eyes again."

"Why?"

"I don't want you to see me cry right now."

"But I've seen you cry before."

"That's not the point, just close your eyes."

Johnny sighed and shut his eyes. "I think I wasn't in danger."

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked rinsing the conditioner out and combing his fingers through Johnny's hair to make sure it was all gone. "Sit up."

"I don't think Chozen wanted to kill me," Johnny said lifting his head and sitting up.

Daniel gently pushed him forward a little.

Daniel scoffed. "Just *you* huh?

"I think he just wanted to spar."

"Why do you think that?"

"He had an opening and he didn't take it," Johnny said.

"What?" Daniel asked horrified.

"I heard a crash and got worried, wanted to make sure you were okay. I was distracted. He could've killed me but didn't. Just pinned me. Told me to focus on the fight I was in. Kreese would've done worse than a dislocated shoulder. And I think even that was an accident."

Daniel frowned studying Johnny's back.

He thought about the way he'd seen Chozen interact with Johnny. The way his tone was different when calling Johnny a baby than when he'd said it to Daniel. The way it'd irked him, pissed him off. How he'd looked so pleased carrying around Johnny's jacket. Like he'd won something.

"You think you could stay away from Chozen?" Daniel asked voice tight, pissed.

Johnny laughed softly. "Haven't we been *trying* to avoid Chozen? Haven't we been failing? It's a big island and yet he always just shows up."

Daniel wondered if Johnny had noticed.

Popular type Kumiko said in his head and he sighed.

Johnny shivered.

Daniel had forgotten how close he was, that his breath was on the back of Johnny's neck.

There was no way in hell Daniel would lose to Chozen. Not on this front.

He ran soapy fingers up and down Johnny's back. His shoulders were pink, he looked up. Johnny's ears were red.

It reminded him of the beach, the photoshoot. But there was no one here to tell him to hurry up. No excuse Johnny could have to tell him to hurry.

"Hey, could you lean forward a little bit more?" Daniel asked, pulling the stool closer to the tub.

Johnny pulled his knees up to his chest and then leaned forward against them, being gentle and careful of his arm and shoulder.

Daniel remembered the book he'd checked out what felt like years ago.

He'd avoid Johnny's hurt shoulder.

He pressed his fingers into the knots that he knew would be there and they still were.

Johnny ducked his head into his arms his ears were red again.

"This-*ah*-again?" Johnny asked and the waver in his voice sent a thrill through Daniel.

"Yup. Told you it wasn't over. You said it was because of midterms. Clearly not," Daniel said as he worked.

He remembered that last time Johnny had told him to talk.

Wondered if that'd help.

If he'd let Daniel get away with this if he talked. It seemed counterintuitive. Like if Daniel talked Johnny would push him away faster. But he'd give it a try.

He talked about the drum technique that always popped back up in his head. How he had to think there was another move related to it, he just hadn't figured it out yet.

He hadn't said it aloud till now. Hadn't tried to work through it and as he dragged his fingers down Johnny's back, watching him shiver he tried to work through it.

He was tempted to go lower. But he didn't. Johnny would not let him do that. Definitely not.

It helped to talk about it. Let him reorganize his thoughts by voicing them out loud with a captive audience. Even if Johnny wasn't really responding.

He thought he'd massaged most of the knots out, as good as he could get them in this moment with one of Johnny's shoulders hurt. He gently placed his hand on Johnny's good shoulder as warmly as he could.

"You can sit up now."

Johnny did so like he was waking up, slow and languid.

Daniel grinned.

He didn't know what he'd expected but for Johnny to practically be putty in his hands after suffering through it was a delight. He pushed his chair over to wash Johnny's arms, being so careful of his injured one.

Johnny just stared at him with dark eyes. He looked so tired, but in a relaxed way. Like he was so relaxed he could fall asleep right there.

He wondered what he could get away with now. He gently ran soapy fingers along Johnny's chest, up to his neck, pressing his hand to the side of his neck and smiling at Johnny.

He didn't flinch, just shivered again.

Daniel was practically leaning over the bath, closer than he probably should've been.

"You want me to wash *everything*?" Daniel whispered, voice low, the flirty tone that never worked but he always hoped would.

Daniel's hand began to trail back down, and after a beat, as if it took him a moment to figure out what Daniel had said, Johnny's hand shot out to grab his wrist, stopping him.

He was bright red. More awake.

"Nope, I've got it. Thanks."

Daniel laughed softly. "Okay, you let me know when you're done then. I'm going to go find a towel or something since I don't see one out."

Johnny nodded his head and Daniel walked off heart-pounding but pleased.

He found the towels and Johnny's things that were in the bathroom still. His bag with all of his clothes in it. He shouldered it heading back down to the garden.

Johnny was washing his face.

"You done?" Daniel asked.

Johnny splashed water on his face trying to get rid of the soap and it was so close to watching a kid in the tub that Daniel laughed.

Johnny looked at him after brushing water from his face. He nodded.

Daniel set a pair of sandals down on the ground outside the tub and held out the towel. He looked up at the night sky, at the moon and the stars.

He heard the water as Johnny stood up, the rush of it.

Felt Johnny's hand on his shoulder using him for balance, leaning into him as he stepped out of the tub.

He misjudged it, trying to use his injured arm and hissing in pain.

He stumbled forward a little with a curse falling into Daniel who wrapped the towel around him as he caught him.

"Forgot?"

"Yeah," Johnny said as Daniel shifted him over to the chair.

"Let me get that medicine on your shoulder," he said looking at the paste Yukie had made for him.

He dried Johnny's shoulder, rubbing it on gently, covering it and then setting the icepack on top.

He was surprised it was still cool.

"I've got it from here. Thanks," Johnny said dragging his bag over next to him with his foot.

"You sure? You nearly fell over."

"I'm just tired. Mr. Miyagi gave me some medicine and I think...I nearly fell asleep."

"You gonna fall asleep putting your pajamas on?" Daniel asked amused.

"No. I can handle that," Johnny said with a frown.

"You sure?" Daniel asked.

"Yes."

"Then I'll go get ready for bed and see you there," Daniel said gathering the stuff Yukie had set out, putting it back in the basket, and carrying it back to the kitchen.

He grabbed his own stuff from their room and changed and waited, worried. Wondering if he should go back and help Johnny. But right before he hurried out the door he heard familiar footsteps and watched the door slide open as Johnny set his bag down.

He had managed it. Barely. It looked like he'd given up on a shirt. He took off the sandals and dumped his bag on the ground walking over. He sunk down onto his knees on the bedding next to Daniel who reached out for him as he shifted to sit.

"You going to be okay to lay down? How can I help?"

"No clue," Johnny said. "Won't know until I try."

He laid down so slowly, with such focus and control, like it was easy to lay down at the speed of a snail. That core strength at work and without his shirt Daniel watched the muscles working, all tense as Johnny laid himself down, abs clear and defined, shifting to try and find a better position. He found it eventually and Daniel grabbed the blankets pulling it over them.

"Wake me up if you need me," Daniel said.

Johnny made a sound that sounded amused.

"What?"

"I'm pretty sure I said that just a few days ago."

"You did didn't you?" Daniel asked with a laugh. It felt like years ago. "Well it still stands, wake me up, okay?"

"Okay," Johnny said softly.

Daniel watched him as his breathing slowed, as he fell asleep, wondering how best to keep himself from hurting him in his sleep. How to sleep so he wouldn't bump into Johnny's shoulder. He wasn't tired. Maybe he wouldn't be able to sleep, too worried. After Johnny fell deeper into sleep he got up and walked out to practice. Staying close so he could hear Johnny if he needed him. If he woke up.

Tea Ceremony

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny's shoulder ached. He'd slept stiffly and without dreams.

He woke up to find Daniel already awake sitting next to him. He was flipping through his Okinawan book with a frown. He looked over at Johnny.

"Morning. Are you okay? What can I get you?"

Johnny pushed himself up with the arm that wasn't hurt and Daniel leaned over hooking his arm under him, helping him the rest of the way up.

"I'm okay," Johnny said.

"How about a shirt? Can I get you a shirt?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah, okay."

Daniel smiled grabbing the new shirt Kumiko had bought him, a turquoise blue with a loud traditional print.

Johnny got one arm in easily on his own but Daniel took over after that helping him get his sore shoulder through the other and buttoning it up.

"You're not going to give this to Chozen right?" Daniel asked.

There was teasing in there but he also seemed a little pissed. That motherly tone Bobby got sometimes.

"I don't plan on it," Johnny said.

Daniel buttoned it all the way to the top.

Johnny was pretty sure he could've figured the buttons out himself. But Daniel had that look in his eyes, a stubbornly determined look.

Daniel retrieved the sling Yukie had set out for him and helped adjust it so it was more comfortable.

"Listen, I already packed. I was going to go for a walk, but do you need help packing?" Daniel asked. "Or with anything else?"

"No, go for your walk," Johnny said. "I'll be fine," he added when Daniel hesitated.

Daniel nodded heading out.

Johnny waited till he left and sighed looking around the room. He was glad they were leaving before things got more dangerous. Before someone died.

Still, he didn't want to leave the island. Yukie had promised to teach him how to make goya champuru but it looked like they'd ran out of time. He'd known they would but he'd kind of hoped that common sense would've struck Sato.

He carefully pushed himself up and finished getting ready for the day and finished packing, carefully moving all of his books into his bag and his Walkman. He looked at his wallet and dumped it on top.

He heard a commotion outside and sighed moving his bag to the door.

Kumiko had told them it was a peaceful village but he didn't think it was. It was a lie.

He walked carefully down the stairs.

He'd have to get help with his bag. It was too heavy with the one arm and he knew if he tried to use the other it'd just make whatever Yukie and Mr. Miyagi had made for his injury go to waste.

He went to the kitchen and ate breakfast.

He heard commotion around the house.

It didn't sound like fighting so he didn't investigate.

He made himself a coffee, taking the time to enjoy the simple waiting of the water to boil on the stove, measuring out the instant powder into his cup and breathing it in.

His mother used to drink instant when he was growing up. He remembered sitting in their kitchen in the mornings while she made it.

Now she drank imported stuff. Fancy beans from around the world.

Stuff Sid got her. Stuff Jimmy sometimes sent home with him when they had too much or wanted a *discerning palate* to try.

His mother always laughed about that. Thought it was sweet when his friends said stuff like that.

She'd lean over and whisper in his ear, "It's like an illusion."

He wondered what she was doing.

He hoped she was okay.

He should've told her where he was going. He should've just sucked up whatever Sid would've said when he answered the phone.

He should've tried.

He missed her.

He took a deep breath shaking his head, opening the fridge, and taking out the creamer.

He always got that way when he was hurt. He didn't tell her he was hurt but he always wanted to be near her when he was.

He'd stopped seeking her out though and just buried the feeling after a while. After he realized she couldn't take time off of work to come to get him, that it was easier to not tell her, to not worry her.

Later he when she could come, when she had the time and freedom to do so he realized Sid would watch like a hawk, ready to pounce if he said a word. If he even tried.

He added a bit of sugar and took his coffee out in the garden. It was still trashed.

It'd looked better when he'd gone to bed in the night, but in the morning light he saw the pulled-up plants and shattered bits of the pots. It was painful to look at. Plants couldn't defend themselves. They'd done nothing to deserve the destruction they'd endured.

He walked down the hall to where he knew Yukie had taken the bonsai to replant them. There were lots of them, ancient small trees that made him miss his own. They looked like they'd be okay. It was a relief.

"Ah, Johnny-san," Mr. Miyagi said.

Johnny turned. Mr. Miyagi was wearing his black clothes again. Similar to the one's he'd worn to his father's funeral, like the black gi Johnny wore for tournaments.

There was a sad look in his eyes and Johnny felt tears well up in his eyes, felt his heart sink.

"You're ready to go right Mr. Miyagi? All packed to go home with us?" Johnny asked.

He knew he wasn't. But he had to hope he'd misunderstood. That there was a chance.

Mr. Miyagi shook his head stepping into the room and putting a hand on Johnny's shoulder.

"Miyagi sorry things not work out."

"There's got to be a way," Johnny said. "You *always* know what to do."

"Made deal. Sato destroy whole village or fight Miyagi. Miyagi agree to fight if no matter what villagers get title to village. Village safe. You and Daniel-san go home."

"We don't want to go home without you. I promised Daniel that all three of us would go home together. That we'd figure out a way."

"Miyagi wish could keep teaching. But Miyagi not worried. Johnny-san and Daniel-san become good men. *Kind* men."

"You promised you'd always be there. If I...If I lost my way."

"Johnny-san, Miyagi always here, even when not here. You remember all teachings. Remember to care for all life. All life precious. When lost look at bonsai, remember you care for it. It grows *because* you care. Go to sanctuary, care for animals, babysit kids and see that heart is not evil. Do kata. Do breathing. Go fishing. One foot in front of other. Keep going Johnny-san. Miyagi proud. Very proud of Johnny-san."

"It's not fair Mr. Miyagi. None of this is fair to you. How is honor worth more than life?"

He couldn't stop the tears, gave up trying to brush them away.

"Life *is* more important. So Johnny-san live. Hmm? Live long good life. Watch over Miyagi's garden. Keep eye on cars," Mr. Miyagi sighed.

"Johnny-san listen. Miyagi not live without regrets. Miyagi have *many*. Miyagi wish come home sooner. Miyagi wish reach out earlier. Wish known Yukie waiting for Miyagi. Waste so much time. Johnny-san promise Miyagi to not make same mistake. Talk. Tell how feel. Take chance so not live with regrets like Miyagi. Okay?"

Johnny nodded brushing tears from his face.

"Really understand?" Miyagi asked.

"I do."

Miyagi nodded and took a deep breath and bowed.

Johnny bowed back feeling the tears well up again.

Johnny watched Mr. Miyagi leave and set his coffee down.

He had to find Daniel.

He searched high and low, throughout the house until he found him standing outside the house looking upset and withdrawn.

He looked up at Johnny.

"Hey, Kumiko said to meet her, let's go."

"Do you want to-"

Daniel shook his head but took Johnny's hand and walked with him through the village, pausing to watch Sato in the shrine and heading out towards the docks.

He knew what Mr. Miyagi had meant.

His heart pounded in his ears.

He had to say something. He couldn't spend forty years not saying anything.

If Mr. Miyagi could face death so bravely then he could just be honest.

Daniel led him into a building that looked run down, where Kumiko sat. She was all dressed up and Johnny wondered if he'd interrupted a date.

She took them in with a smile until her eyes fell on the sling Johnny's arm was in and her eyebrows shot up.

"Chozen," Daniel said quietly shaking his head as an answer.

Kumiko frowned looking at Johnny.

It seemed she didn't want to talk.

He hadn't seen Mr. Miyagi or Yukie talk when they'd done their tea ceremony.

He thought it was supposed to be romantic.

He felt himself falter.

The bravery he'd gathered slipping away as Daniel sat across from her. It looked picture perfect. Sweet.

Daniel looked at him, patted the third cushion and Johnny sat down, carefully.

He watched Kumiko move slowly, every step purposefully as she made them green tea. The matcha Yukie had taught him how to make with less steps, informally.

She turned the cup a couple of times and passed it to Johnny with an encouraging smile.

Yukie had made him the tea to try as a treat after he'd asked about it. It was bitter, she'd laughed at the face he'd made when he tried it. He *knew* it was bitter. Knew he didn't like it that much.

But Kumiko was going through all the work. All the motions. So he drank it.

He couldn't copy her. Couldn't turn it the way she had so he just studied the cup in his hands for a moment then looked at her at a loss.

Did he give it back? Was he supposed to pass it to Daniel?

He hadn't finished it. He didn't think he could politely. He needed sugar or something in it. But that was probably rude.

She smiled a gentle nod of her head towards Daniel.

He lifted up the cup again and turned towards Daniel passing it to

him.

Daniel took it with both hands, fingers brushing Johnny's. He smiled at Johnny.

What did they know that he didn't?

They were all smiles.

How were they all smiles? They *knew* right? Someone had told them that Mr. Miyagi was sacrificing himself for the village? For the good of the lives of his hometown. They were unwitting pallbearers and they were smiling.

Daniel turned the cup in his hands taking a sip and then drinking it all, staring at him like it was a challenge. Like he could handle the bitter earthy taste of matcha without a problem.

Breathe

Kumiko gently moved everything over to him.

Johnny's turn.

He followed the steps she done. It was hard one-handed. He couldn't fold things between his hands. But he knew how to whisk. Yukie had taught him that.

He knew how much water to add from the pot, dragging his fingers across the handle as he put it back the way she had.

Both of them were watching him silently and it was a bit too much.

Kumiko was smiling at him encouragingly, nodding as he did things right, tilting her head as a hint towards the next step.

He'd read about tea ceremonies. How people spent their whole lives learning it and sometimes still weren't considered masters. How samurai used to practice it before battle because it was calming.

Everything had its moment, its place. It was supposed to be zen. Relaxing. And the tea it didn't *just* taste healthy, it *was* healthy.

It also had caffeine in it.

Johnny wasn't sure he needed any more of that. Not with the way his heart was already pounding.

He whisked watching for it to bubble, making sure all the powder got mixed, wasn't clumpy.

He'd read that Okinawa had its own tea ceremony, back in the days of kings where it was a foamy tea and he wondered how much whisking was required to make a cloud of tea foam. The book had said it was impossible to drink without getting foam on your nose, which apparently was the point.

He gently lifted the bowl and turned it and set it back down. Then did it again, enough times until Kumiko nodded, and then he passed it to Daniel who was grinning like this was the best tea party he'd ever been to.

Johnny had been to a couple of different tea parties. The ladies of the country club hosted one in the spring. Up till now, his favorite had been with the kids he'd babysat. But, if he wasn't so worried about Mr. Miyagi., if his heart wasn't pounding so loud that he was sure everyone could hear it, then this would've been his favorite.

Daniel turned the bowl staring at Johnny and then drank it all.

Maybe Daniel liked bitter things. He'd make sure the next time he made him coffee to put less sugar in, find out.

Daniel took over making the tea, eyes flicking to Johnny as he did so, as he went through each step.

Kumiko was smiling and nodding.

It was like he'd fallen through to another world. Like Alice through her looking glass. A world where danger *wasn't* looming. Where the inevitable was only a nightmare that had been blown away by the rising winds.

A world where Daniel was quiet.

He didn't like that part of this world.

Kumiko, though, was a good teacher.

Daniel passed the bowl to him and Johnny was dismayed.

He hated this tea. It needed milk and sugar.

School always talked about peer pressure with drugs and alcohol but never said anything about going to Okinawa and everyone making

you drink bitter healthy tea, expecting you to finish the damn cup too.

They were both staring at him expectantly.

Johnny set it down, turned it, and did that a couple of times, meeting Daniel's eyes, and then took a sip.

Still bitter. Still earthy. Still not his thing.

He set it down, turned it the opposite way, and then passed it to Kumiko who looked like she was struggling so hard to not laugh. She accepted it though and went through the motions and finished it off.

That had to be it right?

End of the class.

Good job team, we learned how to make matcha.

Time to go.

But Kumiko restarted the process and Johnny felt his heart sink.

They were going to make him drink more of the tea. Would it be over if he drank all of it? Was that the point?

They'd be trapped doing this over and over again until Johnny finished a whole cup of it?

They'd wait forever.

He would not be able to drink all of it and remain polite. He wouldn't be able to handle the pain in his shoulder *and* hide the fact he hated the tea.

The tea Mr. Miyagi made back home was better. He liked that.

He'd have to ask Mr. Miyagi what he added...there wouldn't be time.

He wouldn't be able to ask.

Just like everything else he'd want to know. He'd never know.

He felt tears prick in his eyes. He gritted his teeth. He was not going to cry at this tea ceremony.

He took a deep breath.

The cup came back to him. He focused on the bowl, turning it. Breathing as he did so.

He liked this part of it. Even though it'd be easier with both hands.

He liked the slow movements.

It was like kata, like dancing with them learning the steps to the o-bon dance.

Everything was very specific, learned motions, so you didn't have to think, or could just focus on the movements.

He took his sip.

It wasn't like beer. Something that he got used to with additional sips. Or at least not for him.

Johnny didn't regret coming to Okinawa. Didn't regret buying their tickets.

He had good memories of spending time with Daniel and Kumiko, of learning sanshin with Ichiro and Yuna, spending time with Yukie and Mr. Miyagi, of the star-filled skies and the food.

But none of it would make up for that empty seat on the flight back home. For the empty house, the garden without a gentle hand to guide it, becoming wild once more like Johnny feared he would.

How many people would they need to tell? Mr. Miyagi knew so many people. Had changed so many lives.

How would he find the friends that sent Mr. Miyagi mochi for new years?

Would *he* have to be the bearer of the news?

Would he have to be the one, driving to the sanctuary to tell them that Mr. Miyagi was murdered in a duel in his hometown?

Because that's what it was. It was going to be murder. Premeditated by forty years.

What would he say to the kids who always talked about Mr. Miyagi and asked how he was?

What would he say to the guys?

How was he going to face Daniel after all of this?

After promising him they'd all go home together?

He passed the cup back to...which way was it supposed to go again? Who'd made this cup?

Daniel was smiling at him, all encouraging.

How was he not shattered? How was he smiling?

How had Johnny not known from the beginning how strong Daniel was?

That despite how he looked with his thin arms and smaller frame that he was so strong.

Strong enough to hold Johnny up when he lost his balance.

This would be the second time Daniel had watched a father figure die.

He wasn't falling apart like Johnny felt. Like he still had hope. For some last-minute change of course.

Strong enough to not back down, to keep getting up, to keep looking for solutions even in the eleventh hour.

Johnny passed the cup to Daniel.

He didn't know if it was right, but it *felt* right.

Daniel took it smiling at him.

Johnny had thought he'd come along because he didn't want Daniel to worry the whole time because he didn't want Mr. Miyagi to face it all alone.

He thought he'd be there, strong and sturdy for both of them.

But it was really Daniel who held *him* up.

It was Daniel who faced his fears head-on, didn't let the weight of them crush him, who kept turning around and helping Johnny back up every time he felt like he was going to fall.

Every time he needed help.

He really did love him, with all his heart.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: tea ceremony usually takes like 3 hours and usually has snacks.
The traditional Okinawan tea/tea ceremony is called Buku Buku, it's a jasmine tea that gets whisked to a foam, you can read about that ceremony here: https://okinawaclip.com/en/detail/1161

Stormy Weather

Everything was awful but Kumiko had told Daniel to bring Johnny and they'd have tea. That it'd be balancing, relaxing, help them focus. Daniel needed something like that.

Johnny was quiet on their walk over and walk to the place by the pier where she'd set up so that they wouldn't be found by Chozen.

She'd dressed up and smiled at them when they entered.

Johnny looked like he was going to leave, hesitating, but he eventually sat when Daniel motioned to the empty cushion.

Kumiko made tea and it was so quiet and peaceful. Johnny was watching her, every move she made like he was studying. She passed him the cup and he took only a sip.

Daniel wanted to laugh. Johnny was struggling. It was the barest flicker that he didn't like it.

They kept doing it, taking turns making tea and passing the cup around a few times,

Johnny only took a sip each time, like he was participating in only the barest of ways.

Kumiko clearly caught it, but seemed to approve of his form. Johnny got it right pretty fast, knew how to use the whisk that Daniel didn't fully.

If he focused on the moment, on Kumiko and Johnny then he could get through it. Could make it to midnight. He could breathe and hope. Hope that something would happen. That they'd solve this problem. Maybe it be at the bottom of the cup. An answer to save Mr. Miyagi.

He was hoping Mr. Miyagi would think of something, anything. But he seemed determined to face it head-on and nothing Daniel said would change it. He'd tried. Tried everything he could think of.

So instead he focused on Johnny, struggling to keep a straight stoic face every time they passed him the cup. Struggling to not make a face.

The tea was bitter but Daniel liked it.

Maybe it was mean to keep torturing Johnny. But he was only taking a sip at a time. And he wasn't complaining. He just dutifully took his sip and did his best with the motions before passing it on. He was so determined to do his best, just like always.

The wind began to pick up and Kumiko smiled at them putting an end to their class, packing everything up with a warm smile.

"I'll go ahead," she said breaking the spell she'd woven and heading out back towards the village.

Daniel stretched, standing up and reaching out to help Johnny up. He took his hand and stood.

It felt almost like finishing a meditation session. Where even though Kumiko had spoken, he didn't want the peaceful silence to end. But the clouds on the horizon looked dangerous and with the broken windows, they needed to head back into town. Somewhere safer.

Johnny followed behind him. It was probably Daniel's least favorite thing. The way Johnny would slow and follow along, wouldn't walk beside him unless he pulled him along unless he hooked his arm through his. Like he had to remind him to be by his side.

Daniel heard Johnny stop walking and turned.

Johnny was looking at the ground with a frown, brows knit.

Daniel walked back to him and Johnny looked up at him. His stance was rooted. Like he couldn't be moved. Like he wasn't going to budge.

He didn't know why Johnny was going to be stubborn all of a sudden. In the middle of an incoming storm, but he would drag Johnny along if he had to.

"I need to tell you something," Johnny said.

"You can tell me later. Those look like storm clouds, we should probably head to the village," Daniel said.

There was something about the way he was standing that brought a pause, stopped him from reaching out to grab Johnny's hand and drag him.

Johnny shook his head, took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders though a little awkwardly, forgetting his injured one and wincing.

"I didn't want to tell you. I didn't want to ruin things. I wasn't ready. I didn't want to scare you off. I've been selfish. And maybe it was wrong. To let things get out of hand. And I understand if you don't want to see me anymore. I can...well I can go if you want me to. I mean- I want to stay and see this through for Mr. Miyagi. And I hope you'll be understanding about that. But if you don't want me to come back to the house I'll understand. I'll find somewhere else to stay tonight. I can't afford a hotel. I don't have enough left. But our flights are flexible and if you want me to fly before or after you I can. I can leave you alone."

What was he saying? What on earth would make him think-wait *didn't have enough,* did he mean money? Daniel started to open his mouth to speak but there was a silent plea to wait in Johnny's whole stance. Like this was taking all the courage he had and that he was moments from falling apart.

"I wanted to give myself time. To find my footing. To feel like I could become a good person. And I think I'm on the right path. And that I'm getting there. There's a lot of things I didn't think I deserved. Things I wanted. So I didn't try. I didn't go for the things I wanted. I thought you were still hurting about Ali. So I didn't say anything. And now...well Kumiko is nice. I like her, you two could be something for sure. She's sweet."

What the hell was he talking about? Did he really think he and Kumiko were dating? Or were going to be dating? When did he get that idea? *How*?

"I like you. Not as a friend. I mean you're a good friend. But I like you *more* than a friend. I am most at peace at your side. I want to stay next to you forever. But I think I'm torturing myself by not saying anything. And I-"

Wait, what? No no, go back. Him? Johnny liked *him*. Was telling him *now*?

"How long?" Daniel interrupted, it was the only coherent thought that tumbled off his tongue.

Johnny blinked.

Maybe it'd come off a little harsher than Daniel meant, a little desperate and confused. He hadn't meant it like that. But Johnny let go of whatever he'd prepared, whatever line of thought he was following to answer him.

"Do you remember after you told me to come to school, but there was a day I didn't? I've liked you since then. But you were dating Ali and I- Maybe it was wrong. Maybe I was taking advantage of the situation. It wasn't on purpose. I promise. I just didn't stop things."

That meant-

Daniel tried to think that far back.

That meant Johnny liked him in Newark.

It meant Johnny liked him in New York City.

It meant Johnny liked him on their date not date to Sergio's and the movies.

On that day on the beach, when he did the photoshoot.

When they went to the mountains.

Johnny had liked him at the party, when Daniel had drunkenly kissed him.

It meant they could've-this whole time-wait, if Johnny had liked him the whole time why hadn't-*he didn't know*.

Johnny didn't realize all the flirting *was* flirting.

Daniel wanted to scream.

Johnny looked like his resolve was faltering, the courage was failing. Like he was about to run.

Daniel reached out grabbing his hand.

"Don't you dare go running off. Give me a moment," Daniel said weakly, it felt a bit like a rise of panic.

He couldn't focus on anything, there were too many things.

There was so much wasted time. They'd been on the same page and hadn't realized it for so damn long.

Johnny nodded falling silent.

Dinner with Ma. Every single one.

At prom, at Golf 'n stuff.

Reading to him at Mr. Miyagi's, in his room.

He hadn't known.

A bell rang, a steady clanging, in the distance.

The wind was picking up.

It began to rain, a sudden downpour.

Damn it. He had so much to say.

He'd wanted it to be perfect.

He was scrambling to think of the millions of things he had to say.

To grab one of them, *any of them*.

"What are you two doing? It's not safe here! We have to go," Kumiko called having run back after them. "There's a big storm. Don't you hear the bell? We're in danger."

Kumiko pulled on them, getting them moving towards the village as the bell was rung and down into the village as the wind whipped at them and the sky became dark.

It was so fast Daniel couldn't believe it. He held on tight to Johnny's hand.

The hairpin Kumiko had in her hair was gone and her hair kept getting in her face but she kept dragging them along the path through the village into the building everyone else was heading to.

The one leftover from the war.

They saw Mr. Miyagi and Yukie going in.

Mr. Miyagi stopped pushing them ahead in front of him into the crowded building.

They stood next to the window looking out. There wasn't a panel or any glass so the rain that was pouring came in.

Daniel wasn't sure if it was the safest, but he assumed it was the sturdiest building in the village. He watched as a smaller structure fell

over and then squinted into the dark.

"Are those people out there?" Daniel asked in surprise, breaking through all his jumbled thoughts.

"Come. We go help." Mr. Miyagi said.

Daniel nodded then turned to Johnny. "Stay here okay? It's safer here."

"But-"

Daniel squeezed his hand then let go hurrying out into the rain with Mr. Miyagi, Yukie, and Kumiko.

It was a woman and two children struggling to get to the building.

They collapsed in the mud, slipping but together they helped them up and got them moving when the building Daniel had seen Sato in earlier collapse.

Mr. Miyagi and Daniel rushed over.

Why hadn't Sato gotten out of the building? Had he not heard the bell ringing?

A figure came stumbling towards them, Chozen who continued past them in shock saying his uncle was dead.

When Daniel had wished for an intervention on Mr. Miyagi's behalf this had not been it.

They pushed forward seeing the body amongst the ruins.

Sato moved.

He wasn't hurt, just pinned.

Stuck.

Daniel got on one end, trying to lift it. It was too heavy. The wood was too slippery. It wasn't budging.

If Johnny was with them, if his arm was better he thought maybe they could get it.

He wondered if he should go back, get Johnny, but he'd hurt himself with his arm. He'd force it. Daniel knew it.

Heck if he could get Chozen back they might have a chance.

Sato was pissed. Still so angry.

Mr. Miyagi climbed up, taking a deep breath, focused, and then shouted, slamming the side of his hand into the wood. It cracked in half.

Sato stopped talking.

Daniel looked at Mr. Miyagi. He was always full of surprises. Always stronger than he looked. Always knew what to do, even when someone was fighting against him.

He'd still save them.

Mr. Miyagi threw half of the wood pinning Sato to the side, helping him up. Yelling over the wind to Sato to be careful, that he was okay, that he had him. Even after all that time, after everything Sato did, Mr. Miyagi still considered him a friend.

Daniel hopped off the ruins and after them.

In the rain ahead as he squinted he heard someone shouting. A familiar timbre. They heard a scream. Daniel looked up.

There was a kid holding onto the bell tower. Below it was Johnny. He was struggling to get out of his sling, cursing. But the sling was wet and kept sticking.

"Yuna, hang on!" Johnny called up to the child.

She shouted into the wind in Japanese.

"I'm not going anywhere!" Johnny yelled over the wind to her.

She screamed in response.

He muttered curses, trying to lift the fabric to his teeth. He was covered in mud.

It looked like he'd already attempted to go up the bell tower and fell. Hadn't been able to make it up or hang on, with his arm in the sling.

"I'll get the girl," Daniel said nodding to Mr. Miyagi who was looking up at the tower. He nodded, pushing Sato along towards the shelter.

He put his hand on Johnny's other shoulder.

"I'll get her. It's okay," He hurried to the ladder calling up to Yuna. "Hang on! Just Hang on!"

Parts of the tower were falling apart.

He climbed to where she was screaming and the piece they were on, the last of it as it all went crumbling and fell only to stop bell first into a power line.

Sparks flew and Daniel heard Johnny shout something.

He curled his body away from the sparks, taking off his belt and swatting at the power line to get it away before they got electrocuted before it caught on fire.

It fell and he hurried up the rest of the way to get Yuna. He managed to get her to hold onto his back so he could climb down with her.

She sobbed the whole way down until suddenly her weight was gone.

Daniel whirled around to see Johnny. He had her in his good arm like she weighed nothing, not the unwieldy weight Daniel had been struggling with.

She was clinging to his neck so tightly but Johnny just backed away so Daniel had the space to hop down into the mud.

Johnny motioned for him to go, to move towards the shelter ahead of him. The doors opened and Daniel rushed inside, waiting as Johnny stepped in after him.

Daniel was pushed out of the way by a flood of women pulling Johnny into a corner of the room speaking fast.

"What's happening?" Daniel asked as the door was shut behind him.

"They're yelling at him for going out into the storm injured," Kumiko said softly coming up at his side.

"Good, then I don't have to," Daniel said sinking against the wall exhausted.

"He left while we were getting the others back here," Kumiko said with a sigh. "He noticed Yuna was still up by the bell before we did. That she was missing. He fell pretty hard."

Daniel frowned looking at the back of the room. They'd wrapped Johnny in a blanket. He was sitting on the floor, Yuna in his lap.

She was rubbing tears from her face, not budging. He was saying something quiet and she nodded. Her mother with her hands on her hips chiding them both in Japanese in the way mothers did when they were relieved you were safe but still upset you'd almost gotten hurt in the first place.

Daniel had fallen asleep sitting on the floor. He didn't remember falling asleep until Mr. Miyagi gently tapping his shoulder. The storm was over and dawn had broke. Most everyone was gone and Daniel looked around as they left the shelter taking in the wreckage.

"When did the storm end?" Daniel asked. His legs were sore, stiff.

"Don't know," Mr. Miyagi said as they walked back towards the house.

There was some damage but it seemed to still be sturdy.

"Have you seen Johnny?" Daniel asked.

Mr. Miyagi shook his head. "Miyagi fell asleep."

Yukie was already cleaning up.

Daniel greeted her and she smiled warmly then tilted her head trying to look past them.

"Where's Johnny-san?" Yukie asked with a frown.

"He's not here?" Daniel asked.

"No, thought was with you," Yukie said.

Daniel took off his shoes and ran to their room. Maybe he'd made it back first.

Johnny's bag was still there in the doorway. Daniel saw his wallet sitting out and picked it up.

He couldn't have gone far without it.

He opened the wallet. Johnnys driver's license stared back at him, he flicked through the cards they were all library cards to different

libraries around LA, the international phone card with Bobby's number scrawled on it, a few loyalty cards, a pass to get him into the country club.

There was no money.

Not a single coin.

No credit cards.

He flipped through again, there had to be *something*.

Some clue as to where Johnny had gone.

There was a stack of business cards in Japanese and English, something glossy.

He pulled it from the rest.

It was a polaroid of Daniel, wearing his orange puffy coat and hat, his scarf around his neck and he was looking up at something. Deep in thought, at ease, relaxed.

Had he been carrying it around since they'd gone in the mountains?

If Daniel had just looked closer every time Johnny whipped out his wallet to pay would he have noticed, seen it?

He had no other photos in his wallet.

Just Daniel.

There was something written at the bottom in small and careful print.

Daniel LaRusso January 1985, Mountain High

Has good ideas, always listen to him.

He had said something, hadn't he?

He'd told Johnny how he felt?

He felt his veins go cold.

He *hadn't*.

He cursed setting the polaroid and wallet back down on top of Johnny's Walkman, turning on his heels and running back out of the

room.

Kumiko was talking to her aunt and Mr. Miyagi.

"Have you seen Johnny?" Daniel asked Kumiko in a rush.

"No," Kumiko said studying him. "What happened?"

Daniel shoved his feet in his shoes. "I fucked up."

Kumiko frowned. "How?"

"He told me how he felt and I didn't say a thing to him. I didn't tell him. Got distracted by the storm. But everything. I have to tell him before he-well who knows, all his stuff is still here, but I gotta find him."

"Daniel-san," Mr. Miyagi said in a tired admonishing tone. "Always forget, not leave person like waiting."

Daniel froze blinking at Mr. Miyagi.

He'd forgotten he was there.

"Go," Mr. Miyagi said making a shooing motion. "Find Johnny-san."

Daniel nodded swallowing the panic that'd risen back down. He hurried out of the house, turning at the gate and calling, "If he comes here hold him for me please."

Mr. Miyagi nodded and Daniel turned, running down the paths of the village looking for Johnny.

Mr. Miyagi knew.

Had he just found out?

Accepted it so easily?

Important to tell people how feel while can. Understand Daniel-san?

He *had* known. Had tried to tell him. But Daniel hadn't understood. Had misunderstood. It explained the look Mr. Miyagi had given him when he said he was waiting for Kumiko for their date.

He'd expected Johnny.

Had thought-

Ichiro.

Daniel skidded to a stop.

"Ichiro, have you seen Johnny?" Daniel asked.

The old man stopped and shook his head.

Daniel nodded and kept running, past people trying to figure out what was salvageable from the wreck of their vegetable fields.

Daniel cupped his hands, "Have you seen Johnny?" he shouted.

They paused looking at him and shook their heads.

He kept moving.

How long had Mr. Miyagi known? Before they'd left?

Daniel didn't keep his hands to himself. But since Johnny hadn't ever responded he assumed it was some California thing.

Why *hadn't* Johnny responded?

What did he think Daniel thought of him?

Or had he?

All that blushing, was it because he liked Daniel?

Not because he was embarrassed, or specifically because it had been Daniel. Ever since that lunch, when Johnny hadn't said a word. How he hadn't looked at Daniel for most of their lunch and then when he had he'd turned bright red.

That had been *so long ago*.

Shortly after Johnny had gotten his bonsai.

Shortly after he'd apologized.

As if Johnny had sifted through all of the feelings he'd had after everything had ended, the tournament, cobra kai, Kreese, and he'd picked Daniel.

Liking *him*.

What would he have said if Daniel hadn't run away that one time? If he'd just let Johnny talk? Would he have told him back then?

He'd been so busy focusing on the foundation, the structure that he hadn't even noticed Johnny had already moved in. Been there since the beginning.

He was already making him coffee the way Daniel liked it.

He was already playing music, waiting patiently for Daniel to dance.

Yuna was walking towards him and stopped looking up at him, studying him.

Daniel stopped.

"Have you seen Johnny?" he asked.

She nodded. "Beach," she said pointing.

"Thanks," Daniel said breaking into a run.

Sure enough, there was that blonde head.

He had so many questions. So much to say he felt like he'd burst. But at least he'd found him.

They had time. Time for him to figure out all the words he wanted to say. Time to say it all.

Ebb and Flow

Johnny hadn't slept. Everyone around him had fallen asleep including Yuna who leaned back against him.

He wanted to be awake, alert in case the storm got worse, in case he needed to wake everyone up.

He couldn't sleep.

He'd told Daniel.

He didn't know what he expected but he was still waiting for whatever it was.

Trying to prepare him for anything.

Even if that meant grabbing his bags and going home.

The best he dared hope for was continued friendship.

When the sun rose so did Johnny. He carefully wrapped Yuna in the blanket and set her next to her mother.

He stepped carefully and quietly around the sleeping villagers and walked out into the gray morning.

He took in the damage with a grimace. It would take a lot of work to repair. He couldn't help.

He would be in the way, so he kept walking.

After a while, he heard footsteps behind him and stopped and turned.

Yuna was following him.

"Where are you going?" Yuna asked walking up to him and taking his hand.

"I don't know. I need to think."

"About?"

"Everything."

"That's a lot."

Johnny laughed. "Okay, maybe just to think about Daniel."

"Oh, I asked the wrong question," Yuna said.

"Which one?"

"Have girlfriend. Should've asked, have boyfriend?"

"Answers the same," Johnny said.

Yuna frowned looking up at him. "How?"

"I don't know."

"Then maybe do."

"Do?"

"Have boyfriend."

Johnny blinked down at her.

"It's not that easy."

"No?"

"It's complicated."

"How?"

Johnny sighed. "We used to fight, and-"

"Past."

"Huh?"

"Used to, past. So you don't now."

"Well no but-"

"Johnny-san why'd come here?"

"I wanted to stay with him."

She smiled up at him. "Boyfriend."

Johnny laughed. "It doesn't work like that."

She scrunched up her nose. "Sounds like boyfriend."

"I wish it was that easy."

"Daniel-san," she paused thoughtfully. "smiles when sees you."

"He's just friendly."

She pinched his hand and he yelped pulling his hand away. "Hey!"

"Daniel-san not *just* friendly."

They were walking down the road to the beach, the storm had knocked all sorts of stuff onto the beach, driftwood, and seaweed. She hopped away, ahead of him, and spun. "Johnny-san friendly."

"I'm not friendly."

"Liar."

"I'm not. I'm mean."

"Not mean."

"I'm scary."

She burst out laughing.

Johnny sat down in the sand and Yuna came over patting the top of his head. "Johnny-san good. Like Miyagi's. Not bad."

He felt tears prick in his eyes.

She clapped the sides of his face between her hands. "Daniel-san lucky."

Johnny laughed and Yuna sat down next to him, leaning against his uninjured side.

They watched the waves crash for a while and then Yuna looked up at him. "Heal fast so play sanshin more."

"Okay Yuna sensei," Johnny said.

She grinned getting up, she gave him a hug and then darted off down the road back towards the village.

Johnny looked out at the tide. It was the same ocean as the one back

home.

He sunk a little further down into the sand, laying on his side.

Maybe he'd sleep a little.

The storm had passed.

Mr. Miyagi was safe it seemed.

No one was too badly hurt from what he'd seen.

He'd just close his eyes a little.

"Seriously?"

Johnny blinked awake.

Daniel was looking down at him.

Johnny stared back up at him.

He was too tired.

He shut his eyes again.

"Hey now, you know when you said you slept on the beach I thought- are you seriously going back to sleep? Do you know how worried I was? That doesn't look comfortable at all, seriously? Are you sick or something? Did something happen to your arm?"

Johnny felt Daniel messing with his sling. He was pressing the back of his hand to Johnny's forehead.

"No fever," Daniel said, carefully removing the sling away from Johnny's shoulder, investigating as best he could.

"-m fine Daniel," Johnny murmured.

"Drunk? How could you have even managed that?"

"Sleepy."

Daniel huffed sinking down into the sand next to him. "After *everything* you couldn't just-why, why here? Why do you sleep on the beach? How are you comfortable?"

"Listen."

Daniel sighed, moving in the sand and falling quiet.

Johnny could hear the sound of the waves crashing, the sounds of the ocean.

He could hear Daniel breathing similarly next to him, following the sounds of the waves.

Johnny breathed with it, the way he always had, always feeling more at peace at the ocean, having not put it together for so long. Matching the ebb and flow to his breath, how it always lulled him to sleep, made him feel safe.

Why he always found his way back to it.

"Johnny," Daniel said softly. "I don't want you to burn. I didn't bring anything with me. You said you turn bright red. I can't believe you actually fell asleep on the beach twice."

Johnny opened his eyes.

Daniel was leaning over him concerned.

"Did you not sleep last night?"

"I didn't."

"Why?"

Johnny gave him a look.

"Oh, right," Daniel said sitting back.

Johnny pushed himself up.

"Why did you leave?" Daniel asked.

"I wanted to give you time and space to think," Johnny said. "You kind of looked like you were freaking out."

"I did?" Daniel asked rubbing his face. He sighed. "Johnny what did you *think* was happening?"

Johnny frowned, mulling it over. "I thought I was interrupting your dates with Kumiko."

"I-Johnny, Kumiko, and I aren't- we're just good friends. Like you and Kumiko?"

"Yeah?"

Daniel took a deep breath and put his hand on Johnny's good shoulder. "Since *before* the party?"

"Yes."

"You are right, I did need time to process *that*, but not-not the way you thought. Why do you think I kissed you at the party?"

"You were upset, drunk, and I was there."

"And every time I touched your thigh? Moved in super close? Held your hand? Touched you?"

"You're touchy. I thought maybe you were touch starved or something."

"Touch starved? What does that even mean?"

"Bobby read about it at his old school. Read it to us at one of our first study groups. It's when you don't get enough physical touch that you need or are used to."

Daniel let out a snort of laughter.

Johnny frowned turning to face him more. "I thought it was the way you'd been in Newark and after months of only having Ali as a friend and girlfriend, and Mr. Miyagi isn't exactly- so I thought that you-"

"Were starving?" Daniel asked burst out laughing. "Is that why you and the guys are always touching? Why it was such a big deal when they could hug you again in New York?"

Johnny looked away with a frown. "Maybe."

Daniel cupped the side of his face, turning it back towards him, letting his thumb brush over Johnny's lips. "Are you sure *you're* not touch starved?"

Johnny blushed bright red, felt a shiver run across his skin, down his

spine.

Maybe he was.

Or maybe it was because it was Daniel.

Or maybe both.

Daniel was smiling. "I've been *flirting* Johnny. Since the party at least, possibly before that. I broke up with Ali for many reasons, but a *big one* was that I like you. I was trying to go slow because you were healing. But it was incredibly frustrating that you never noticed I was flirting."

Johnny's heart pounded hard in his chest.

Daniel leaned forward pulling him into a hug.

"I probably looked like I was freaking out because I was doing the math. All the moments that I thought, *gosh these feel like dates,* only to realize they *could* have been. Because I was going to tell you I liked you. I had all these plans. I was trying to pick out the most romantic and sappy one to tell you so that you wouldn't be able to rationalize it away. So you would finally see I've been flirting all this time. Hey now, what are you doing? That arm is hurt, stop moving it! You haven't had a chance to let Mr. Miyagi look at it again. Don't damage it."

Johnny paused, he'd been lifting his injured arm up to return the hug with both hands, his other arm resting gently along Daniel's shoulders.

"Was I like this when your knee was hurt?"

Daniel laughed a puff of air on his neck that tickled.

"You were ready to carry me around everywhere. Oh, I'm going to be so much worse. Now, as much as I like sitting on the beach with you, as much as I want to keep talking. We should go back before you burn. Because then I'm *really* going to be annoying."

Daniel pulled away and stood up, brushing sand off of himself.

Johnny stood up, carefully. He held his hand out to Daniel.

Daniel looked at his hand then up at Johnny with a grin, taking it.

"I should've checked the beach first. Instead of literally asking every

single person I saw if they'd seen you."

"What-?"

"They're all out trying to find what's salvageable in the wreckage and I ran past asking if anyone had seen you. They probably all think I lost it."

"How *did* you find me?"

"Yuna knew where you were."

"Ah, that makes sense."

"I do have another question. Are you out of money? I...looked in your wallet, did you not bring enough or something?"

They were turning the corner into town where it was busy, with people hard at work and they walked into the house.

"Hold that thought," Daniel said taking off his shoes and rushing into the house.

"Ah, Haitai Johnny-san," Yukie said with a smile walking past with a basket.

"Haisai," Johnny said with a bow of his head.

"Breakfast in kitchen, tell Daniel-san."

"Thank you."

She nodded continuing on her way.

Daniel came back with a tube of sunblock.

He squeezed some into his palm then shoved the bottle under his arm.

"Come here will you?" Daniel asked, not stepping down from the raised platform.

Johnny walked over, looking up at him.

"Close your eyes," Daniel said and Johnny did. "Money?"

Johnny shifted uncomfortably. "I'm out."

"Out of money what does that mean?" Daniel asked rubbing sunblock into his skin, his face, and neck.

"I spent the last of it on our tickets."

The fingers on his skin stilled.

Johnny opened his eyes.

Daniel was staring at him wide-eyed.

"How?"

"I got an allowance until I graduated. It wasn't a lot, but I'd saved up since...I was a kid. It was my emergency fund, in case I had to go, or something happened. I spent it all this year."

"You spent it **all**? On what?" Daniel's voice was tight.

Johnny looked away.

"Johnny, what did you spend it all on?"

"It's not a problem. I can find a job. I've worked before."

"*Johnny.*"

"A lot of small stuff really. It all adds up," Johnny said looking out at the bonsai that Mr. Miyagi had replanted.

They looked like they'd be okay. Like they'd weathered the storm.

"A whole lifetime of savings doesn't disappear that fast because you're paying for gas for the Avanti. Did you use it to pay for the doctor for my knee?" Daniel asked, voice soft and barely a whisper.

"I did," Johnny said looking up at Daniel again. "And I'd do it again in a heartbeat. The doctor, our round trip tickets here, without hesitation."

"I thought you were rich."

"*Sid's* rich," Johnny said.

Daniel sank down onto the wooden platform.

"Money comes and goes," Johnny said softly. "I've survived not having

any before. It's fine. I can find work. Tommy can always help me figure out my resume. Plus I've got a stack of business cards, Kumiko can help me go through those and figure out if they are jobs."

"I have my winnings, from the ice-breaking bet, I can pay you back-" Daniel said.

"No," Johnny said shaking his head. "I don't want your money, I just want you."

Daniel's head shot up looking up at him wide-eyed. "How can I argue when you say stuff like that?"

Johnny was so close he could see that Daniel was blushing, it wasn't as obvious as it was on Johnny, and not when he was in the shade.

Johnny smiled softly.

It looked like Daniel was almost upset that he was blushing.

Like he still wanted to argue.

If it made him happy Johnny could try.

"You spent all your money on me. How can you-"

"Not all of it. I still bought gas. I mean I was driving out of the Valley weekly if not more than weekly. I spent a lot on gas these last few months."

Daniel sighed, reaching out and rubbing a bit of sunscreen on his cheek.

"I missed some," he said softly.

"Ah, you found him," Kumiko said.

Johnny turned.

She was holding a tray of iced coffee.

"You really worried Daniel," she said. "Where'd you even go?"

"He *slept* on the beach," Daniel said.

"You slept on the beach? Why?"

"It's calming. I was tired."

Kumiko laughed shaking her head fondly and taking a seat next to Daniel. She handed each of them a glass of iced coffee.

"Did you talk?" she asked, head tilted curiously.

"Talk?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah," Daniel said then looked up at him. "She knows."

"She knows what?"

Daniel let out a deep sigh like he was so tired.

Kumiko laughed softly. "That you two like each other."

"You knew?" Johnny asked.

Kumiko nodded. "Do you remember when you arrived?"

"Yeah," Johnny said with a frown.

"Mr. Miyagi introduced you two, said you were his students, good boys, who were also dating just didn't realize it."

Daniel had been drinking his coffee and spluttered, coughing.

Johnny stared at her in shock.

He'd thought Mr. Miyagi knew, at least had seen through *him*, because he'd told Johnny to talk about his feelings.

But Yukie had been there, which meant she knew.

Which...was that why she'd been laughing when she'd made his bath?

Johnny felt his skin burn.

She'd said Daniel's name while talking to Mr. Miyagi who had just nodded in response.

How many people had it taken?

Johnny didn't want to think about it.

Suddenly remembering the feeling of Daniel's fingers on his skin, massaging away at his muscles, how nice it'd felt. How he'd almost not

noticed what Daniel had said or where his hand had been. Flirting. Hadn't noticed he'd been flirting.

Oh god how much flirting had he missed? He'd been half asleep, the medicine had made him drowsy, but, still...

He looked away.

"Did he see the magazine?" Kumiko whispered.

"Kumiko!" Daniel yelped.

She giggled. "Sorry, I just thought from how red he is."

"You traitor," Daniel whispered.

"Magazine?" Johnny asked turning back to them.

"Nothing," Daniel said.

"Nothing?" Johnny asked. "It doesn't seem like nothing," he said motioning to Kumiko who couldn't stop giggling.

"I'll tell you later, some time, maybe," Daniel said looking away.

Johnny sighed shaking his head.

"Keep your secrets then. I'm going to go change."

He took off his shoes and walked up the steps to their room.

He dug around in his bag picking out something to change into that wasn't caked in dry mud.

Taking off the sling was a pain. But unlike the night before there wasn't an immediate rush to try and get out of it.

Daniel wasn't going anywhere. There wasn't a fight or danger. He could change and take his time.

It took a while, but he got it off, hanging it up on one of the hooks on the walls so he could come back to it.

His shoulder hurt.

The medicine Mr. Miyagi had given him had long worn off and falling off the bell tower hadn't helped things. But it wasn't swollen or hot.

Everything was just painful and stiff.

He managed, very slowly and very carefully to change out of his muddy pants and into some more comfortable shorts and put his wallet in his pocket. More out of habit than use. Then went through the painful ordeal of trying to put a shirt on.

He'd given up the night before after his bath.

He'd been too tired and just couldn't figure it out without dull bursts of pain. Then in the morning, Daniel had helped him into the shirt Kumiko had bought him.

He got one arm through and his head through one of his t-shirts and just had to figure out how to get his arm through without the pain.

It was ridiculous that putting on a shirt was so hard.

He'd done it countless times.

Every day, sometimes more than once a day, over bruised ribs and countless other injuries.

Hell, he'd dislocated his shoulder before.

Maybe he'd gotten soft. Maybe he didn't want to just stand tall and suffer through it anymore.

Maybe he couldn't.

Could he just walk around shirtless? That'd be easier.

He took the shirt off with a frustrated sigh.

"Hey," Daniel said.

Johnny turned.

Daniel was standing in the doorway, leaning against it. "Need some help?"

Johnny frowned looking at Daniel.

Normally he'd say no. Normally he'd just keep trying.

He held out the shirt.

"Yeah, the pain medicine's worn off."

"Okay," Daniel said taking the shirt that was balled up. "We can fix that. Step one shirt, step two find Mr. Miyagi or Yukie and have them take a look."

"I'm sorry, this is so-"

"Johnny," Daniel said stepping close, carefully getting his injured arm into the shirt before moving it over his head and other arm, dragging it down his chest, fingers brushing his torso as he did so. "I like taking care of you."

He'd made it seem so easy.

Johnny lowered his head to Daniel's shoulder, pressing his forehead against him. Daniel's arms came up around him.

"Seriously, it's okay," Daniel said softly. "I didn't just say it to just say it when I said a couple of nights ago that I'd help, to let me know if you needed anything."

"Thanks," Johnny said softly.

Daniel's arms were so sturdy.

He didn't want to move.

He didn't want to go anywhere.

He wanted to stay like this forever.

But Daniel stepped back after a while. "Let's go find someone okay?"

Johnny nodded and Daniel walked with him down the stairs and back out.

Kumiko was still sitting, drinking her iced coffee.

"Have you seen Mr. Miyagi or Yukie?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah. They're out that way," she said motioning.

"You mind watching him? He's in a lot of pain," Daniel said.

Kumiko nodded, and Johnny sat down ever so carefully next to her and Daniel left.

"I didn't get to ask," Kumiko said softly "What exactly happened to your arm?"

"Chozen dislocated it, on accident I think."

She wrinkled her nose in a frown. "On accident?"

"He trashed the place, we fought by spear, he slammed down and it popped out."

"And then you fell from the bell tower," Kumiko said in a hushed whisper.

"I didn't get that high up," Johnny murmured. "It wasn't that *bad*.

"It was very brave."

"It was desperate and stupid," Johnny said with a sigh. "I should've tried to get help."

He pulled out his wallet and blinked, the photo of Daniel was on top.

He blushed lightly as Kumiko leaned over to look.

She scooped it up with a laugh. "You two are exactly the same."

"What?"

She looked at him and then laughed shaking her head, flipping through.

"Oh, are those the business cards?"

Johnny nodded handing the wallet to her.

"Wow, that's a lot of library cards," she said before taking the stack and flipping through them. "Oh, wow."

"What?" Johnny asked.

"Because we were in such a rush I didn't get a good look at the ladies you were talking to. This one," she said flicking up a card. "Is a pottery artist in Naha, she probably was offering you a free lesson. This one works at one of the traditional theaters they do performances. This one is a fancy restaurant. You got a lot of business cards."

"So they're not jobs," Johnny said softly, disappointed.

"They might be, but like you go and have fun and they take photos and use it for advertising."

"So a trade?"

Kumiko nodded. "Might be fun for dates," she said with a grin.

"Do you want to go do any of it?" Johnny asked.

Kumiko blushed lightly. "I thought you *just* told Daniel you liked him!"

"I did," Johnny said confused. "But your our friend and we don't speak Japanese or Okinawan."

Kumiko laughed softly, "Oh, no wonder you two have struggled so long."

"What?" Johnny asked brows knit.

Daniel came back with Mr. Miyagi.

"Miyagi look hmm?"

He gently rolled up Johnny's sleeve and pressed ever so gently on Johnny's shoulder. Johnny jumped with a hiss of pain.

Daniel grabbed his hand.

"Is it because he fell?" Kumiko asked.

"Fell?"

"He tried to climb up the bell tower to try and rescue Yuna but fell," Kumiko said.

Mr. Miyagi clicked his tongue. "Wait, be back," he said.

Daniel stepped forward cupping Johnny's face in his hands. "Have you been in pain this whole time?"

"It's not that bad."

"*Johnny."*

It was a gentle admonish, a gentle request for him to be honest.

Johnny shook off Daniel's hands, he looked a little hurt, but Johnny reached out hooking his arm around Daniel, waist pulling him close,

between his legs, and rested his head against Daniel's chest once he was close enough to do so.

"Yeah," he said softly.

Daniel sighed wrapping his arms around Johnny, carefully avoiding his shoulder. "Speak up next time okay? I mean I hope there's *never* a next time, but you shouldn't suffer just because you can. You shouldn't just suffer in silence or alone. You're not alone, okay?"

"Whose Bobby Brown?"

Johnny cursed softly. He'd forgotten to call.

"It's one of our friends back home, he's requested we keep him in the loop," Daniel said, he was rubbing circles on Johnny's back. "Kumiko, I know it's weird, but do you mind calling the number on there and telling him or whoever answers that we're okay? We didn't call because of the storm so he and the guys are probably worried."

"Isn't it really late there?"

"We're 16 hours ahead, so it might be, but they might also be really worried. They just need a quick update. It might not be Bobby, but just whoever it is let them know okay?"

"Okay," Kumiko said pushing herself up and heading off towards the phone with the card in her hand.

"It's okay, see?" Daniel said soothingly, curling over him, fingers running down his back.

"I hope they behave," Johnny said softly.

"The guys?" Daniel asked, sounding amused.

Johnny nodded and winced.

"Ah, Yukie said there's breakfast," Johnny said.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"Should I go get food?"

"No," Johnny said tightening his arm around Daniel's waist.

Daniel laughed, it was light and warm and Johnny could feel it all around him.

"Do you really like me?" Johnny asked softly. "Not as a friend, or more than a friend? You made it sound like it's been a while too. Did you really? Er-do you really?"

Daniel was silent for a while, an unbearably long time and then he took a deep breath.

"I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun."

Johnny looked up startled feeling his ears burn.

"Did you just quote *Pride and Prejudice* to me?"

"Hey, I may have been enjoying the view but I was paying attention."

The view? What view? Mr. Miyagi's garden?

"You. You're the view that I like," Daniel said, cupping his face. "One day you're going to catch on faster. But it's kind of worth explaining it when you turn so red like this."

Johnny hadn't even said anything aloud, had his questions and confusion been so apparent?

He quickly ducked his head, pulling Daniel back to him, hiding his face, heart pounding.

"I talked to Tommy?" Kumiko said sitting down next to them. "Your friends are updated."

"Thank you," Johnny mumbled into Daniel's shirt.

"And Aunt Yukie gave me toast for you guys. Said you hadn't eaten."

"Thanks, Kumiko," Daniel said.

"Is Johnny okay?"

"He's fine."

"Not fine," Mr. Miyagi said setting down a big basket of supplies. "Johnny-san in pain."

"Well yeah, I- Mr. Miyagi, it's different-" Daniel sighed giving up explaining.

"Miyagi fix," Mr. Miyagi said.

Johnny turned his head to watch as Mr. Miyagi rolled up his sleeve again from where it's slipped, studying it and then very gently rub some cream on his shoulder and wrapping it gently back up. He was so gentle that if Johnny hadn't been watching he might not have noticed.

He felt tears well up in his eyes, glad Mr. Miyagi was there.

Glad he hadn't gone anywhere, hadn't been murdered by his childhood friend.

Mr. Miyagi then held up a little cup. "Medicine, drink. Eat toast, go to bed."

"It's morning," Daniel said.

"Hai, Johnny-san need rest. Go on dates later."

Kumiko burst out into a fit of giggles while Daniel sputtered trying to say something, shocked and blushing.

Johnny ate the toast Kumiko gave him and drank the medicine Mr. Miyagi had given him.

He was tired.

The medicine he knew would make him even more tired.

"You'll all be okay?" Johnny asked.

"Yes," Daniel said.

Johnny nodded.

He could just sleep here.

That'd be fine.

He didn't want to go up the stairs.

And if he was here they could wake him up if something important happened.

He could help if there was some danger or something.

He started to lean back, to slowly ease himself down onto the boards.

"No," Daniel said grabbing his shirt. "You are not sleeping here. You're sleeping in the room."

"Here's fine."

"Yeah, I'm getting that. But again, like the beach, I'd rather you sleep somewhere safer."

"Already have sunblock on, here's fine."

"You're *not* sleeping in the garden,"

"It's nice though," Johnny said with a yawn.

"Get up Johnny you're going to the room."

Johnny nodded, putting his hand over Daniel's.

He thought he could get up.

Tried to shift to get up but it'd require too much energy.

He'd have to make Daniel move.

But he was too tired.

He could just sleep here.

Daniel let go of his shirt and stepped back to give Johnny the space to get up. Johnny frowned, blinking at him.

Mr. Miyagi's medicine sure was potent.

He slid forward off the walkway and turned, heading towards the steps.

The garden looked cozy. So green.

Daniel was gently turning him, pushing his back towards the stairs.

"I'll make sure he's in bed," Daniel said.

"Careful," Mr. Miyagi said.

Johnny was herded to bed.

It reminded him of after the bath. Struggling to get out of that chair, debating just sleeping in the garden that night, but knowing Daniel would worry.

He'd nearly fallen on his way back so many times that he lost count.

He wanted to stay awake.

He wanted to talk to Daniel more.

Wanted to clarify everything. Set it out in certain terms. **Like** was established.

Was it too early to tell Daniel he loved him?

Probably.

Ask him out on a date? Kiss?

Every time Johnny tried to focus he couldn't figure out where they were. He'd lost the thread. Was all tangled up in it.

Enemies. Friends. Like.

What came next?

He couldn't remember.

He knew how he felt. But he wanted to take the steps properly.

Didn't want to scare Daniel off.

Saying *I like you* and then *I love you* within... twenty-four hours seemed a bit too fast.

Needy? Clingy? There was a word for it.

He couldn't remember what it was.

Desperate? Was Johnny desperate?

That didn't make sense. What did that even mean? Desperate for what?

He couldn't focus. He couldn't think of how it went.

Oh, thank god, the bed.

He'd think about it later.

He sunk down to his knees.

He wanted to just flop onto his stomach but he knew he'd hurt himself.

He laid down carefully.

"You okay?"

"Mmm."

Words were too hard. Thinking was too hard.

He shut his eyes.

He opened them.

Where would Daniel go? What would he do?

Why was he so tired?

Was he already an 80-year-old man going to bed at....oh god the clock said 11 am.

Or was this more like a college kid thing?

Party hard, go to bed when adults with 9-5s are getting lunch?

Though even *that* didn't feel right.

The college kids he saw in the library were up all night studying and working on projects.

Daniel was talking again.

"I'm going to go for a walk. I'll be back. Don't- well, just sleep okay? You need sleep. I'll be back, okay?"

Johnny nodded.

He wanted to keep his eyes open.

Wanted to watch Daniel.

But when he shut them to blink, when he just rested them a little, he fell asleep.

The Sake Cup is Not an Animal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was almost like when Johnny had been sick. The way he kept looking for Daniel until he fell asleep. Like he didn't want to go to sleep and was determined not to but his body took over and knocked him out.

Daniel didn't want to leave his side, but he wanted to go for a walk, wanted to talk to Mr. Miyagi, wanted to take in Tomi Village after the storm because even though he'd walked through it several times going to look for Johnny and coming back with Johnny he hadn't really looked, he'd been too focused on Johnny.

He had a lot to think about. To go through in his brain and he needed time to do so.

He carefully worked his way back down to where everyone else was, sitting and quietly talking in Japanese.

"I'm going for a walk," Daniel said putting his shoes back on.

"Miyagi join," Mr. Miyagi said and Daniel nodded.

He'd expected it. Had hoped for a chance to walk together. It always helped him clear his head to be focused with Mr. Miyagi beside him.

They walked through the remains of the village and Daniel asked Mr. Miyagi questions. About the village, how a vegetable farming village was going to recover from a storm that destroyed what Chozen and Sato hadn't mere days ago.

Had it been days? Had it been yesterday? Time was all a mess.

He was so busy, everything just crammed on top of one another and it messed with his perception of time.

What he *did* know was that Johnny liked him.

Had confessed to him in the middle of a storm.

Possibly one of the worst times to confess anything but he kind of liked it. He could tease Johnny about it forever.

Remember when you told me you liked me? In the middle of a super dangerous storm when we were supposed to head to shelter? How you just stopped walking like you would refuse to move forward any longer without saying it.

It was sweet.

One day he would tease him about it.

Now wasn't the time.

Now wasn't the time for a lot of things.

He hadn't realized how much pain Johnny was in. Hadn't put the two and two together. All the mud on him from falling off the bell tower in the storm. Though Daniel hadn't seen that. Hadn't seen how high he got up because he'd been helping Mr. Miyagi rescue Sato. But he knew how slippery the wood had gotten. How dangerous it had been.

Johnny also hadn't slept. No wonder he'd fallen asleep on the beach.

Johnny struggled to sleep during normal everyday situations. Heap some danger on top and Daniel should've known. But when they were together it seemed like he did sleep.

That should've been a hint.

That Johnny didn't just trust him but felt safe around him. The way he seemed to gain strength from Daniel, find *him* to be the sturdy one. Like Daniel was a pillar of strength. The thought was something he felt all the way in his toes if he explored it too much, too much of a thrill.

It was the way Johnny held on to him, hadn't let him go, didn't want to let go when he was in so much pain like it helped.

Just Daniel being there *helped*.

Daniel thought *he* pulled strength from Johnny, that it was one way. He'd thought everything had been one way and had only hoped that he could make it go both, for it to be mutual. But it had been the whole time.

Now that he looked at what he knew, it was overwhelmingly obvious

that something had been there, stronger than he'd thought if he'd only looked.

Johnny slept well in his arms and when he didn't Daniel could get him to just through breathing techniques.

When he wasn't well he looked for Daniel.

He looked for Daniel even when he was well. All those check-ins. All the blushing was *for* him. Not general embarrassment.

He'd spent all of his life savings on Daniel within five months of their friendship.

That one stung a little. He wasn't particularly happy about it. But Johnny had been so adamant that it was fine. That he wouldn't change it. It wasn't on the top of the list of things to focus on at the moment. He would later.

Johnny listened.

Every word. All the time.

Liked hearing Daniel talk. Which Daniel didn't understand. No one liked hearing him talk, his own mother got tired of it. Everyone got tired of it. Except for Johnny. Johnny asked him to talk *more* when he fell silent as if it was something he craved.

That...was definitely something. Did something to him.

If Johnny had liked him for so long, did all those dates count? That thing Johnny had said at the party.

I don't normally let someone feel me up until like the 5th date.

Had they already passed that? He had kind of already done that, twice now, three times now? Did the party count? On the beach for the photo shoot and in the bath.

Could he keep doing that?

More than that?

Or now that Johnny knew he liked him back would there be set steps that had to be followed.

Did he have a laminated free pass?

Would he be giving Johnny who was still injured more baths?

Was it more torture knowing Johnny liked him back and being close but not knowing where they were or what Johnny was comfortable with than it had been before, not knowing?

They were going to have to talk. About a lot.

Daniel was going to have to wait. Until Johnny felt better. Until he could focus on a long conversation and not sink beneath waves of pain and exhaustion.

He wanted to be organized.

He wanted to collect all the errant thoughts and bring them forward.

Organize them, list them, and work their way through, and even though that *one* kept floating to the top it was, despite how much he wanted to put it on the top of the list, lower in priority.

A fleet of cars and construction equipment rumbled into the village bearing Sato's name.

"What's Sato doing here?" Daniel asked feeling panic run through his veins.

There was no way right? After saving his life Sato *had* to have turned over a new leaf. No one could hold onto a grudge for forty years and then be saved and still hold onto it right?

"Don't know," Mr. Miyagi said as they walked down the road looking at the cars and trucks as they passed by.

One car stopped and Sato got out without his sunglasses on. Without a suit. He was wearing what looked like a workman's uniform and cap. He carried a little box. When he got close he bowed to Mr. Miyagi.

Everything about him was different, not just the way he was dressed or the way he walked, but his facial expressions no longer held that hatred, and he spoke softly without the gruffness that he'd had before every time he shouted after Mr. Miyagi.

A different man than the one Daniel met originally and he felt relief flood his veins.

It'd be okay. Mr. Miyagi had turned his enemy back into his friend.

Kumiko and Yukie had come over and Daniel remembered the o-bon festival.

Kumiko had said it'd be fun. Could be romantic.

Maybe that'd be a good idea. Sato seemed to be in a friendlier mood.

She should ask. Oh, she didn't want to ask.

Well Daniel could ask. Why not?

He was feeling good.

Mr. Miyagi was safe.

Sato was helping the village.

Johnny liked him back.

"Mr. Sato, you know o-bon dance is soon, and it's gonna be real hard the way things are, to have it here in the village," Daniel said, trying to make the suggestion gentle and like a great idea, unsure if Sato and Mr. Miyagi were on good terms if that expanded to Daniel or the rest of them.

"What you ask of me?"

"Well can they have it in the castle? That's where it really belongs anyway, isn't it?" Daniel asked. He felt like saying it so pointedly would hopefully help get the point across. The unsaid *the castle that you're selling away piece by piece even though it's not just yours.*

Sato stared at him, clearly catching the unsaid words. The pointed *why don't you give back something you took that wasn't really yours to take?*

"Your student become my teacher. O-bon will be held in castle. Now and forever."

Daniel was relieved he hadn't meant for it to come off so harshly even though he felt it. Sato had made their week in Okinawa hell. It was the least he could do. The look on Yukie and Kumiko's faces made up for any reservations he'd had. They looked so happy.

Daniel smiled.

He'd let them talk.

Sato and Mr. Miyagi and Yukie had a lot to catch up on, now that they weren't fighting.

He nodded to Mr. Miyagi and made his way through the fields arm in arm with Kumiko.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"It's the least I can do," Daniel said with a soft laugh.

Talking was one of his specialties.

Being the braver one to ask someone a question was easy for him.

"How is Johnny feeling?"

"He passed out," Daniel sighed. "He's probably been in so much pain. He's so used to handling everything on his own, that he just didn't speak up."

"Are you happy?" Kumiko asked, tilting her head to try and see him better.

"Yeah, things have been a roller-coaster here. I think you lied about this being a peaceful island. But they're good now."

Kumiko laughed. "It's usually nice. Maybe you just bring adventure with you."

"Well, I've had enough adventure for the rest of my life. I just want..." Daniel stopped. "Well, I don't know what I want to *do* with my life. But I do want to spend it with Johnny."

"Ah, romantic," she sighed.

"What can I say, I'm a romantic. Since he's sleeping and hopefully healing, what can I do to keep myself busy until my sleeping beauty wakes up? Help me find something I can do to help the village," Daniel said rolling up his sleeves. "I'll take a page out of his book. Put me to work."

Kumiko laughed looking around.

"Ah, let's help them," she said carefully stepping around to a house that had had a tree fall on it in the storm.

Kumiko talked to the people in Japanese and they responded. They

were clearing a path back into the house to see if they could save anything. The tree had been removed already by Sato's crew.

"Sato's people will help re-build. But they need to get whatever they can salvage out and into the wooden boxes to keep it safe," she said pointing.

One of the men in the grey work clothes tapped a pair of gloves to Daniel's chest.

"There's a lot of broken glass," Kumiko explained. Putting her own pair of gloves on. "So be careful."

Daniel nodded and followed her into the house. They went through the debris.

Daniel went where he was directed. He helped carry out furniture that had survived. He carried out fragile things like photos and paintings that hadn't been ruined, books, and kitchenware.

It was a lot of back and forth. A lot of carrying things. In and out of the dim house, with the crunch of broken glass under his shoes, around and past other people doing the same.

A woman sat with the boxes. She took the fragile things, carefully wrapping them, and putting them into the boxes.

She nodded at him every time. Bowing and taking things from him with two hands.

Kumiko tapped him when it was time to take a break. They sat on a flat rock that they'd had in the garden and one of Sato's men gave them bento boxes and thermoses.

"What are they going to do?" Daniel asked.

"They'll stay with neighbors whose homes weren't as badly damaged until their home's rebuilt," Kumiko said. "Without Sato's help, it'd have taken a lot longer. But with them, they'll be back home before the o-bon festival," Kumiko said opening her box. She seemed to approve.

Daniel opened his. It was rice and grilled fish and what looked like tiny grapes still on the stem.

"What's this?" Daniel asked picking them up with his chopsticks.

"Umibudo, mmm sea grapes? They're a type of seaweed."

"This is not seaweed," Daniel said. "These are definitely grapes."

"Try them, salty, not sweet."

Daniel did so. They were good. She was right, they weren't sweet, they weren't grapes. But they were so small and burst on his tongue. They were so small. He liked how it all went together.

Maybe when he got home he'd work on lunches.

He thought they were the most boring meal after years and years of cafeteria food. Just a quick meal in the middle of the day. The only fun part had been talking to friends, which he hadn't had for six months, but those last months with the guys and Johnny had made it fun. But the food had been *boring*, the only highlight being whatever Bobby had brought.

He liked bentos.

He liked the little lunch boxes that Mr. Miyagi had made him. And Johnny liked them. He liked the idea of one day sending Johnny off to wherever he was going for work or school with a bento. Stopping part of his day to eat lunch wherever he was to eat the same thing wondering if Johnny was enjoying his.

Kumiko was telling him about the o-bon dance. How she was excited to dance in the castle. That her house hadn't gotten too badly damaged, so she could wear her nice traditional clothing and do a dance with a fan.

He finished his bento and drank from the thermos.

It was soup.

He coughed in surprise and she laughed.

"Have to have soup," she said with a grin.

"Needs a warning label. Like careful, there's tofu in this. Don't choke on it," Daniel said with a frown after catching his breath.

"It's good for you," she said with a grin.

"Not for your lungs. I really do not want to have survived all this, for Johnny to like me back, and I die by tofu," Daniel said wrinkling his nose.

Kumiko opened her thermos and poured it into the lid, which he now realized was a cup. "It's a little more obvious this way huh? Less death by tofu?"

"Oh, I see how it is," Daniel said with a sigh, sarcasm dripping. "Totally missed the obvious?"

Kumiko patted him gently on the shoulder.

"I believe that's a common theme in your life."

She managed to keep a serious straight face through the delivery and for a few seconds after before bursting into a fit of giggles.

"Hey! There were a lot of factors okay."

"*Sure*."

"We hated each other."

"Did you really?"

"He was scary when he was angry."

Kumiko nodded. "But not angry anymore?"

"No. It's like it was all..." *squeezed out of him*. Daniel frowned at the thought, pouring his soup into his cup. "He went through a lot. Doesn't excuse it. But he's made up for it. And I like him."

"*Clearly*."

"Okay, yes. Got it. You think I'm not also vastly aware we could've been dating since like January?"

"January!" Kumiko gasped. "Miyagi sensei did not say how long you two had been courting. Daniel! It's June!"

"*I know,"* Daniel grumbled into his soup. "I was gonna tell him when we went home."

"Were you? Really?"

She didn't sound like she believed him. Like Daniel would've continued putting it off. He didn't think he would've.

But what if each of those daydream ideas hadn't gone perfectly?

Did he want everything to be perfect?

Need it to be?

Would he have changed course last minute each time out of fear of Johnny not reciprocating it?

Damn, how had Johnny done it?

He remembered that determined stance, the wind blowing Johnny's hair from his face, whipping at his clothes.

He had been so determined to say it, to get it off his chest that he wouldn't even back down in the middle of a dangerous storm.

He was going to say what he was going to say, he was going to confess whether the storm came or not, no matter what in that moment, and Daniel hadn't even been able to respond.

He'd gotten so used to Johnny following him.

Bending and being flexible that he'd forgotten what it was like when Johnny dug his heels in, when he was determined.

How he turned into an immovable boulder.

It would've been scary once upon a time.

But it was a relief to know that Johnny still wouldn't budge on things he thought were important.

And *that* had been so important to him that mother nature be damned. Fuck danger. It was brave and stupid, hot and endearing, and made Daniel just want to run back to Miyagi's house, up those stairs to be near him.

But Johnny needed to sleep. Needed to heal.

Daniel would get all his feelings out eventually, the overflow that had been building for months, he'd try and be gentle on voicing them, not a tidal wave of a broken damn like he feared would happen. That he wouldn't be able to shut up and would just keep talking about everything. Every moment. Every missed opportunity. Ever unfulfilled plan he'd had.

He was worried he'd embarrass himself.

"I tried to be obvious and it never worked," Daniel said softly. "I was running out of ideas."

"So from now on your just going to talk to him?"

"I mean I'm still going to flirt, but I don't mind explaining. It seems to have rewards."

He didn't mind at all. The way Johnny had turned bright red over something so simple, a quick explanation was delicious.

He could live off that.

Almost a year ago he never would've imagined it. Never would've thought Johnny would look at him like that. He was pleased by it. Happy.

They finished their lunch and went back to work.

It was exhausting but they cleared out the house of everything salvageable and the family thanked them warmly, bowing and shaking Daniel's hand warmly.

It took everything in Daniel not to turn and run. To match Kumiko's pace on their walk back to Mr. Miyagi's house.

"You're struggling."

"What?"

"It's all over your face."

"Huh?"

"You just want to see if he's awake yet."

"I can wait."

She laughed.

"I can!"

She laughed harder and he knew he was blushing.

He could be patient. He *had* been patient.

"You want to be a prince," Kumiko said with a giggle.

"No, I-wait what do you mean?"

"Like a fairy tale."

Daniel stared at her in confusion.

"Snow white, sleeping beauty. Wake up to a kiss. Saved by a kiss, by a prince," Kumiko said with a grin.

"That's not-"

"You want to run straight to him and kiss him."

"That should be romantic. If I didn't get to have a romantic confession on my end then I for sure as hell am making sure our first kiss that's sober is romantic," Daniel said.

"If you spend too much time trying to be perfect it will never happen," Kumiko said with a frown.

"Well, I'm going to try."

"Then you are not going to kiss him till your fifty."

"I won't take that long!" Daniel said looking at her horrified.

"You move at turtle pace."

"He's hurt."

"His lips are not hurt."

"He has this thing about only counting kisses that happen when people can remember them. And with the amount of medication he's on, I'm not sure he'd be aware."

Kumiko sighed and nodded. "That makes sense."

The lights were on at the Miyagi house and they walked through the gate. A mat was set out in the garden and a table was set out. Mr. Miyagi, Yukie, Sato, and Johnny were sitting around the table.

Johnny's hair was damp and he was wearing different clothes. Daniel was disappointed. He'd had a bath already.

He'd been hoping to wake Johnny up, to be the one there when he woke up, to help him. To have those eyes look for him and find him.

It looked like they were playing a card game.

Johnny was studying the cards in his hand with his brows furrowed in confusion.

It smelled nice, like something delicious was being cooked.

Johnny looked up when they stepped into the garden and smiled a soft smile at Daniel.

Daniel walked over taking off his shoes and sitting down on the mat next to Johnny.

He wanted to wrap his arms around him, tell him he missed him all day, thought about him all day, but even though Yukie and Mr. Miyagi knew it wasn't really a good place to do so. It was something he wanted to say just for Johnny.

"oh, hanafuda," Kumiko said, sitting down next to them.

"Teaching Johnny-san," Mr. Miyagi said with a soft smile.

Daniel looked at the cards held in Johnny's hand. They were not like any playing cards he'd ever seen before.

Johnny leaned over towards him. "It's not easy. I only understand part of it. They're broken up into months of the year, matching sets of four with animals and plants and stuff. And you want to match them. But then there are different matching themes and those are all worth different points and that's where I'm lost."

Daniel wrapped an arm around Johnny, no one would see it he thought.

"Does not help Sato-san play different," Yukie said with a laugh.

"I play right way," Sato said stiffly but with a smile. "Think Miyagi-san rusty from USA."

"Miyagi play every year with 442nd friends. Not rusty," Mr. Miyagi said. "Yukie-san play same way. Sato play different."

"It's kind of like Uno," Johnny said softly. "Everyone has different rules and thinks they're right. Makes it a little harder to figure out the sets beyond they match."

"Are you playing Koi Koi?" Kumiko asked studying the cards on the

table and looking at the ones Johnny held.

"Yes," Johnny said.

"Then you have Koi Koi."

"That's where the argument is," Johnny said as Kumiko took the matching set from his hand and set it out.

"Not a set!" Sato said.

"Is set!" Yukie said with a laugh. "All same! How not same?"

"They've also been drinking," Johnny said softly, pointing out the glasses with ice in them sitting on coasters with condensation around the table.

"Sake cup not animal," Sato said.

"Not animal, but part of set," Mr. Miyagi said amused. "Always part of set."

Daniel wrapped his arm around Johnny. "What are they drinking?"

"Awamori, local drink." Johnny said. "Potent apparently."

"Sato-san think sake cup not animal but think Iris animal," Yukie said with a laugh.

"Iris not animal, but fish in water," Sato said tapping the card Kumiko had put down for Johnny.

"Johnny, say Shōbu," Kumiko said with a grin.

"Shōbu," Johnny said.

Sato groaned leaning back his head. "Sake cup wild card, not animal." He held up his hand. "Fine fine, Johnny-san win. Good job Johnny-san. They teach you wrong, but I outnumbered."

"What does Shōbu mean?" Daniel asked.

"Game," Mr. Miyagi said collecting the cards. "Koi Koi mean keep going. Kumiko sneaky."

Kumiko grinned rolling up her sleeves. "Shōbu means we can join in. Koi Koi meant we'd have to wait."

"Ah, first!" Yukie said getting up. "I bring out dinner."

Johnny shifted and Daniel tightened his grip. He'd remembered Johnny at his grandparents, standing every time his grandmother came or left the room.

"Do you need some help?" Johnny called.

"No no, rest Johnny-san."

The tension Daniel felt in Johnny's back left and he settled back against him. Too well trained.

"What did you do today?" Johnny asked turning to Daniel.

"Kumiko and I helped some of Sato's staff prepare a home for reconstruction. I think that's the right word. Just moved furniture and everything that had survived out so they could safely store it until they get their house rebuilt."

"Sounds busy, a lot of work," Johnny said. Almost like he was disappointed he hadn't been able to help.

"How about you?" Daniel asked.

"Slept most of the day," Johnny said with a frown. "Then woke up to hearing Sato, panicked and came down the stairs and they were all laughing and talking. I'd missed the memo I guess."

"Ah, right, Mr. Miyagi broke a wooden beam that had Sato pinned during the storm. Saved his life and this morning Sato brought the deed to the village, his men to help rebuild, and asked for forgiveness."

Johnny nodded. "So I took a bath, changed, and then Yukie started dinner and we've been playing Hanafuda most of the evening."

"How's your shoulder feeling?"

"Better," Johnny said then turning his gaze to Kumiko, "Do you want to pick a card for tomorrow?"

"Card?"

Johnny shifted pulling out his wallet and passing it over. "Already called the guys today. They were disappointed that I wasn't Kumiko."

Daniel laughed softly and watched as Kumiko pulled out the business cards.

"Ah, what are those?" Sato asked suddenly curious.

"Johnny made friends when we went dancing. They invited him out." Kumiko explained flipping through the cards.

"We should go here tomorrow," Kumiko said putting a card down.

Daniel leaned forward looking at it. "An aquarium?"

"Best Aquarium," Kumiko said with a grin. "Largest aquarium tank in the world."

Mr. Miyagi chuckled softly as Sato set his glass down and missed the coaster. "Too much old friend?"

Sato responded to him in Japanese and Mr. Miyagi replied the same.

Johnny sighed leaning into Daniel. "So, aquarium?"

"Sure," Daniel said. "What time?"

Johnny turned to Kumiko, "What time works for you?"

"Think you can both be awake and ready at 7 am?" Kumiko asked.

"Yeah," Johnny said.

Was Daniel missing something? It'd sounded like a date. But Kumiko was going with them? He'd cleared that up, hadn't he? Was Johnny still confused?

Mr. Miyagi burst out laughing at something Sato said, and Sato was gesturing with his drink speaking rapidly, face red, clearly drunk.

Yukie returned with dinner and they ate.

They played a couple more rounds of the card game, it was difficult to pick up there were so many cards and it was all image matching. Daniel didn't know all his flowers and trees so it was difficult to realize which ones were matching sets. Plus Yukie and Sato would put down sets that weren't matching trees or flowers or ribbons and Daniel hadn't a clue how they'd matched.

"See?" Johnny said softly.

Eventually, they called it a night and Johnny and Daniel headed off to their room. Daniel's heart pounding in his chest the entire way up the stairs.

Was it weird now? Now that they knew? Would it be the same? Different? Did he want it to be the same or different?

"Why is Kumiko coming with us tomorrow?" Daniel asked when they were in their room. "You did understand that I don't like her that way right?"

"Oh, uh...she has a car, speaks Japanese, Okinawan and English, and knows her way there. It's not in Naha, it's further North. I thought it'd be smart. I can't drive at the moment and I don't know if we could even borrow someone's car for you to drive. Or if we might mess up and drive on the right because we forgot they drive on the left. I also don't know if we even could legally drive here," Johnny said. "Plus she's our friend."

Daniel hadn't even thought about all of that. "Oh," he said softly.

"Logistically it made sense, was I wrong? Did you want to do something different? I let her pick because she's doing a lot for us and can read the cards."

"No, you're right. I just was looking forward to spending time alone with you."

"We're alone now."

"I meant as a date," Daniel said amused.

"Oh."

"You said five dates," Daniel said stepping towards Johnny. "If Kumiko comes with, does it count as a date?"

Johnny stared at him confused.

Daniel sighed. He hadn't meant for this to be the first part of their conversation, but it always floated to the top. And he was there now. He was following the wrong thread, but it was the one he always came back to, one of the ones that had given him hope and a goal. But maybe it'd make him look bad if he focused on this one too hard. Revealed how much he held onto that goal and wanted to chase after it. Wanted to know what other rewards came after a certain amount of

dates.

"Five dates?" Johnny repeated clearly trying to remember when he'd said it and the context.

"Don't worry about it. It doesn't count," Daniel said walking past him towards his bag.

"Wait, I want to understand," Johnny said.

"You said it a long time ago," Daniel said. "The point is I don't know where we are-"

"Tomi village."

Daniel laughed turning.

Johnny was smiling.

It'd been a joke.

The guy had bad jokes, elementary school jokes.

That was new but nice.

"*No*, I know where we are physically in the world. I mean our relationship."

Johnny nodded, sitting down on the floor carefully and patting it across from him.

Daniel sat down across from him.

"I like you," Johnny said.

Daniel smiled. "We've established that."

Johnny nodded. "So what do you want to do?"

Everything.

"Date. Exclusively."

"Okay."

"Boyfriends."

Lovers.

Johnny was a little pink but he nodded.

Daniel wondered if for a moment he'd said the second part aloud. He was sure he hadn't.

"I do want to talk more about everything. Make sure we're on the same page," Daniel said after a while. "It's why I was planning to make this big deal out of telling you."

"Do you want me to take it back?"

"Huh?" Daniel asked looking at him surprised.

"Do you want to pretend I didn't say anything so you can continue your plans?"

"What? No! Why would you think I'd want that?"

"You've mentioned it several times now." Johnny said. "If it makes you happy I could just pretend, be surprised."

Daniel shook his head, bring his hands down to Johnny's knees, leaning forward a bit. "No way, you can't take it back even for a second. I will just use the ideas for dates or something."

Johnny's hand that wasn't in the sling came down over Daniel's. "I don't need big statements or romantic things. I'm just happy that you like me."

Daniel looked at him flipping his hand over to hold Johnny's, enterlacing their fingers.

"Me too," Daniel said.

Johnny was definitely blushing in the lantern light of their room but he looked happy. He looked at ease.

This was definitely the right direction.

The way they were supposed to go, the correct path they could take together.

Daniel couldn't wait to enjoy every step along the way. Good or bad didn't matter because he'd hold that hand no matter where they went.

Chapter End Notes

Hanafuda means flower cards. Here's a website that breaks down the sets and all the cards: https://www.gamedesign.jp/flash/hanafuda/rule_e.html

Open doors

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The alarm clock went off at 6:30 am and was followed by a grumble in Johnny's ear. Daniel was curled up behind him, arms around his waist, leg over his hip. He'd said it was the only way to sleep and try and keep his shoulder unhurt.

It'd taken Johnny forever to fall asleep.

He blamed spending all day sleeping, but he knew it was because of how close Daniel was, the feeling of his breath on his skin, knowing that they were *boyfriends*.

Daniel had fallen asleep pretty quickly. He'd worn himself out throughout the day helping with repairs while Johnny had slept.

An almost dreamless sleep throughout the day. He assumed it was the medicine.

The only dream he'd had in the middle of the night was about being at the animal sanctuary and being asked to take care of a baby hippo that kept charging around like it was a dog and he had to figure out how to feed it a watermelon when it kept trying to jump up, thinking itself a dog and it was a baby so it didn't realize it could totally crush Johnny's arm in its mouth.

It'd been stressful but not nearly as bad as most of his dreams.

Johnny turned off the alarm and shifted carefully to look at Daniel. There was no reason to keep pretending he slept through the alarms.

"Morning," Johnny said softly.

"Does it have to be morning? Can't it be 3 am still so I can stay right here?" Daniel mumbled.

"You don't want to go to the aquarium?"

"I do," Daniel said. He spoke as if there was a but in there, a however, but he didn't continue, just pressed his nose into Johnny's neck. "Why'd we agree to 7 am?"

"She's driving. Driver picks the time."

"If she visits I'm waking her up at five am," Daniel grumbled.

He sighed rolling away from him and pushing himself up into a sitting position, yawning and stretching.

Daniel's hair was all messed up and Johnny sat up, reaching out to smooth some of it down, it refused to stay put.

It was cute.

Daniel heaved himself up after blinking blearily into the gray of their room and then got up, grabbed his bag, and headed off to the bathroom.

Johnny did his best to get dressed.

It was slow going, a button-up was easier he realized so he went for one of those and then shorts.

He'd deal with the sling later.

Daniel stopped him on the way out of the room and frowned, set his bag down, and set about buttoning Johnny's shirt up the rest of the way.

They went downstairs where Kumiko was waiting, leaning against the gate.

"Breakfast on the way," she said with a grin.

The drive was nice, peaceful. The village was already looking so much better. Sato's trucks and men were hard at work putting it back together again. Daniel was talking to Kumiko about the aquarium. Asking questions as they made their way down the long winding roads.

"Ah, almost forgot," Daniel said digging around in the bag he'd brought with him.

He turned to Johnny who frowned. He was holding sunscreen again.

"You don't have to-"

"Did you put any on?" Daniel asked.

"No."

"Then I do."

Johnny frowned but didn't move out of the way as Daniel rubbed the sunscreen into his skin while Kumiko laughed.

It seemed dangerous for him to be doing it while she was driving, he'd practically climbed into Johnny's lap, and his face was focused, looking down at him. Johnny put his hand on Daniel's hip, worried he'd fall if they hit a bump of some kind, wanting to say he'd be fine and it wasn't like an emergency.

Surely he'd be fine for an hour drive or however long it'd take. But he'd also seen Daniel's bathroom back home at South Seas. All the little creams and stuff. He hadn't ever looked in the bag Daniel took with him to shower or bathe, but he had a feeling there was a multi-step routine beyond just washing his face. The guy would look young forever and that seemed his goal.

Daniel was cupping Johnny's face brushing his thumb over his cheek like he had the day before, smiling down at him.

Kumiko was still talking about the aquarium. And Daniel was responding but not taking his eyes away from Johnny's. He had a job to do and he was not going to stop until he's done.

Was this his life now? Was it a good thing? Embarrassing?

Johnny didn't know. But it was hard to breathe, he kept forgetting to, too busy, too focused on everything, the hand on his good shoulder pressing down and using him for balance, the wind messing up whatever attempt Daniel had made on his hair, the feel of Daniel's fingers across his skin, the way his knees were framing his thighs, the way he kept getting lost in his eyes, forgetting where they were what they were doing, only focused on Daniel. Unable to keep any focus on the words he was exchanging with Kumiko.

His world had shrunk down to just the boy in front of him, whose fingers were now rubbing sunblock into his neck, with caution and concern but there was no fear there anymore and not with Daniel.

They got breakfast at a drive-through, Kumiko passing their orders to them and eating while she drove the rest of the way.

Daniel had settled in next to him, pressing close. When he was done

eating his hand went to Johnny's thigh like usual, like always, but it was different. Because Johnny knew there was more to it now. That it was just him.

Kumiko parked at the aquarium parking lot and they walked to the front desk where she took the business card from Johnny and spoke quickly to the young receptionist. A woman came out sounding absolutely delighted to see them, listening to Kumiko and nodding her head, and responding in Japanese.

"So she'd like, if we're okay with it, for all three of us to be part of it. We walk around, look at stuff, enjoy the place and a guided tour, someone takes photos. And we get souvenirs from the gift shop for free," Kumiko explained. "I'm down, how about you two?"

Johnny glanced at Daniel who looked surprised but nodded.

They were led through the gates and into the darkness of the aquarium.

It wasn't particularly busy and the guide explained the different fish and animals that called the aquarium home. Showing them local favorites like the little garden eels who poked their heads up out of the sand to look up at them as they stopped to look in.

They watched clouds of jellyfish move through the water in their tanks around them, little crabs scuttle across the sand, and then Daniel stopped at his side and Johnny caught sight of what he was looking at.

A gigantic tank, full of fish and manta rays and whale sharks.

He'd seen pictures of them but never seen one in person.

They were huge.

They stayed there for a while staring up at them, hands finding each other in the dark like always, not even thinking about it, no words necessary. Just knowing.

They worked their way through the rest of the aquarium until they reached the end where a staff member made them bright blue soft serve ice cream in cones decorated with little pearl-looking sprinkles.

They walk around outside eating their ice cream. They walked through the gardens full of vibrant and colorful flowers and with a view of the ocean crashing nearby.

The park was massive beyond the aquarium and it took a while to walk it. But it was peaceful with a nice ocean breeze.

When it was time to go the woman returned, thanked them for their time, exchanged contact info with Kumiko, and handed them each a bag.

"One more, in car," she said with a smile. "Arigato. Enjoy Okinawa."

They thanked her and walked back to the car where a giant whale shark plush animal took up most of the space.

The three of them stopped staring at it.

"How?"

"Daniel you're going to have to hold it the whole drive back," Kumiko said.

"Seriously? It's massive. I didn't know they made stuffed animals that big."

"It kind of looks like it's driving," Johnny said with a laugh.

"It does," Kumiko giggled.

It took a bit of work. They put the bags in the trunk and Daniel sat in the middle hugging the gigantic plush to his chest so it wasn't blocking anything in Kumiko's small white car. Getting it back to Miyagi's place was an ordeal. But they managed it.

Daniel didn't seem to want to let it go. Carrying it up to their room like it was going to go home with them.

Johnny wondered if they'd have to buy it a seat on the airplane. If that'd even be a possibility.

He couldn't, but maybe they'd figure it out.

They let Kumiko pick the next place too and she drove them on another day to a little cafe where they were introduced to an elderly woman who taught them the traditional Okinawan tea ceremony. Kumiko looked delighted. Whispered to them that during the war most of the stuff to make their, Okinawan specific, traditional tea was destroyed. It'd almost been lost. And the importance of this elderly woman teaching them fell with a level of gravity he wasn't expecting. It explained why when she'd been looking over the cards she'd

grabbed it so excited with her eyes shining.

They watched the elderly woman whisk tea and she didn't stop. It was the tea he remembered reading about and it foamed up into a cloud. They followed the steps she laid out, sitting in seiza and moving the careful way that was explained, turning the bowl again. It was difficult and a bit different.

The foam, the cloud rising up out of the bowl got on Johnny's nose. Both Daniel and Kumiko laughed.

The lady doing the class also smiled and nodded like this was expected.

It wasn't bitter it was a different type of tea and it went well with the snacks they'd been given, little sweets and cookies. Kumiko paid close attention to every step, talking excitedly with the lady running the class and the one who'd given Johnny a card.

They worked their way through the cards, something to do as the village recovered. As Sato spent time at the house talking to Yukie and Mr. Miyagi, as all the wounds began to heal and Johnny's shoulder got better with the medicine Mr. Miyagi and Yukie gave him.

They took pottery classes and they drove around Okinawa following the cards he'd been given meeting the women he'd met that one night again, this time with Kumiko to help with the conversation.

They ate at fancy restaurants, watched traditional performances, and looked at art, by his side taking in everything was Daniel.

It was like a bunch of dates. Though he knew Daniel didn't feel quite the same since they had a chaperone the entire time, with Kumiko along. But everyone seemed to be having fun and it was worth it.

Pictures were taken along the way by strangers and in a few places Johnny was even paid for his time, which was confusing as he was the one getting free stuff, but it was a bit of a relief to have cash in his wallet again. Not enough to pay to get the whale shark plush home, but maybe they could ship it.

Johnny was beginning to worry he was going to run out of space in his suitcase.

He had to take the library books home. He couldn't afford to replace them. So they couldn't be exchanged for anything else.

They took up a lot of space.

He hadn't expected to be gifted so many things in exchange for just letting people take his photo.

After an afternoon walking through some caves, they returned and Yukie called out to him, welcoming them home and motioning for him to come help her.

Daniel patted him gently on the back of his shoulder saying he'd take everything up to their room.

Johnny found Yukie in the kitchen.

"We make goya champuru," she said smiling at him.

He'd nearly forgotten she'd promised to teach him. She'd set out everything needed to make it in that organized way she had.

There was a strange bumpy green vegetable she pointed to. "Goya," she said.

He recognized the rest of it. Had learned that most of the meat was pork from Kumiko and he was familiar with tofu now.

She had him help cook a few things once his shoulder got better but they'd all been easy things to help her assist by cutting up onions and other vegetables. He was getting much better with a knife under her tutelage. He was feeling more confident in the kitchen, learning her recipes.

Though he hadn't a clue how he'd find any of it in LA. Especially the goya she'd set in front of him to cut in half and scoop out the center with all the seeds, then slice into thin pieces. It kind of reminded him of cucumber or zucchini, just very bumpy.

He cut up the pork, cut up the tofu, and then went about cooking them separately and carefully under her instruction.

She was making him do this one on his own he realized nervously. Like it was a final exam in cooking but open book because she was telling him what to do, or kind of.

After cooking everything individually he added them all together again with some sauces he'd made and whisked eggs.

He put some onto a small plate when she gave him a nod for her to

try.

He waited, watching.

She grinned at him. "Good Johnny-san."

He smiled, pleased with her approval and they set about finishing dinner. Rice and soup on the sides and carried it to the table.

He found Daniel and Kumiko talking on the steps, and Yukie found Mr. Miyagi and Sato in the dojo.

They sat around the table and Yukie spoke warmly in Japanese.

"You made this?" Kumiko asked with a big smile reaching out to Johnny, squeezing his arm fondly.

"Yukie-san told me what to do," Johnny said a little embarrassed at all the attention that was suddenly his way.

"What's this?" Daniel asked picking up a piece that was green.

"Goya," Johnny said.

"What's that?"

"Goya is Okinawan for bitter melon," Kumiko said.

"Very healthy," Yukie said with a smile.

"Johnny-san do very well," Sato said as he ate.

Mr. Miyagi nodded in agreement.

It was kind of weird having Sato with them without Chozen lurking. Johnny wondered where he'd gone, but no one had mentioned it. It was as if Chozen didn't exist which gave Johnny a bad feeling. According to Daniel, they'd saved Sato and he turned over a new leaf. But Chozen was probably still out there harboring a grudge, but alone now. He could strike at any moment. He'd be outnumbered now that Sato was hanging around. Going for walks with Mr. Miyagi and Yukie, talking and laughing as if there hadn't been forty years of pain.

Daniel's hand found his thigh. "It's delicious."

"You really do like bitter things huh?" Johnny asked.

The bitter melon was bitter, it was aptly named. But Yukie had had him cut it into thin enough pieces that it wasn't a problem and it was seasoned well.

"I like to think I have an adventurous palate," Daniel said. "I like to try things. You should try almost anything at least once if you're not allergic to it."

"Anything?" Johnny asked.

He'd been reading about a fruit that had a strong smell and was spiky. It was beloved and popular despite apparently it was banned in hotels and public transit. Maybe Daniel would also try that. He'd been curious but they looked massive and he didn't want to waste it. This was the same guy who went on rants about pizza. But, to his credit, he did try them. Just complained the whole time. Maybe he would, one day, try durian with Johnny.

"Anything," Daniel said looking at him directly like a challenge, squeezing his leg.

One day they'd have to go somewhere and try durian then. Maybe they could make it a thing. Try new foods frequently. One of the restaurant owners had been talking about it when they'd gone in. Talked about how much they always loved it when they traveled. That and about something new in Taiwan. A drink with tapioca in it.

Johnny also wanted to try that.

Maybe Jimmy would know about that one. He'd have to ask when they went home.

It was one of those moments where he did wish that Sid liked him. It'd be so nice to keep traveling with Daniel, trying new things and exploring the world, making friends. But he didn't have money.

You needed money and free time to travel.

Johnny only had one of those.

And Sid had the other.

It was so close and felt a little unfair. It wasn't like Sid spent his money wisely. He just relished in having it and other people *not* having it. But he also viewed it as a moral failing that they didn't. Like he'd actually worked for it and his parents hadn't just handed it to

him.

Maybe Johnny could find a job and he could save up.

The problem was a job would take away his freedom. You only ever got one or the other and sometimes you got neither. His mother worked to the bone and got neither.

He refused to worry about it though. Not here. Not now.

This was further than he ever expected to go from home and it was worth enjoying it, the food he'd made himself was delicious enough that it surprised him and *healthy*.

Kumiko was listing all the health benefits at his side and Daniel was listening on his other side smiling warmly.

It was a table he never would've dreamed of finding himself at and he was grateful.

Grateful to be surrounded by friends, people he liked that he hadn't had in his life a year ago.

He wouldn't have met Daniel for almost another month, didn't meet Mr. Miyagi till much later.

If life could change so fast, then anything was possible.

If he could be in Okinawa eating food he'd made himself with friends, a sensei who cared, and a boyfriend then the world was full of possibilities.

He'd opened the right door.

Picked the right path and someday they'd go somewhere else.

Someday they'd try something else they'd never heard of before and love it just as much.

And someday they'd have a nice table where the people they loved, the friends they'd made along the way could come through the door they left open for them to sit and enjoy the warmth of a loving home with delicious food they'd made.

And on quiet nights where it was just the two of them, Daniel could make Italian food or Johnny could find some recipe he wanted to try and make something new, or something Yukie had taught him and it'd

be nice and more than he ever could've dreamed.

Chapter End Notes

The aquarium didn't exist the way it does now in the 80's, but it did exist and was award-winning and did have the biggest tank in the world in the 80's. It's part of the Ocean Expo park which is huge and full of gardens and traditional things like sanshin classes. Again not sure if that existed in the 80's in that exact way, the land did and they did make it a park back then. I'm also not sure if they had the jumbo whale shark plush's then. But it's a lottery ticket prize you can get. It's massive. The ice cream is actually something that the aquarium in Osaka has which is their whale shark inspired ice cream.

Buku buku tea (the traditional Ryukyuan cloud tea) recipe to do at home: https://www.onookinawa.com/2017/05/16/bukubuku-cha-at-home/

Goya Champuru aka bitter melon stir fry recipe: https://www.justonecookbook.com/goya-champuru/#wprm-recipe-container-63453

Do note maybe don't eat the bitter melon raw, it really is bitter. It's not a misnomer.

Practicing for You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daniel had known it'd been selfish to want to just spend time with Johnny. He hadn't looked forward to getting up early to meet Kumiko and go on their date with her chaperoning like they were some couple from that book Johnny had read to him. Maybe his frustration with it was exactly the reason why they needed a chaperone. But Johnny was right. It was just like before. *Before* Johnny had said anything.

Kumiko showed them around, translated, drove them, and she really was fun to be around. It made Daniel feel bad. He felt bad that he hadn't wanted her to come along even if it'd just been a moment.

She's our friend.

Johnny had said it almost like he didn't understand that Daniel had wanted to spend time alone with him, away from the house, away from everyone, just the two of them. And Daniel had never thought of himself as the person who started dating and ditched everyone, but he wanted a honeymoon period and he was beginning to think he wasn't going to get it. Because he was sure once they got home the guys would be around. And he missed them. Looked forward to seeing them, but he didn't want to share.

He was having fun though. He liked the aquarium. He liked the cafes, the shows, the restaurants. He liked seeing the buku buku tea on Johnny's nose. And it took everything in him not to lean over and lick it directly off. It was tea, and something precious an elderly woman was sharing with them. But still. He knew if he did it Johnny would turn bright red and he wanted to know what would happen after that, because *they* knew now.

People were giving them free things because Johnny was pretty.

He didn't say it, but that essentially was the reason. They took pictures and said they planned to use them for advertising and Kumiko promised him she'd try to collect them all and send them to him. Which kind of embarrassed him, but he didn't turn her down, didn't correct her because he *did* want to see them. He wondered if they could do a scrapbook. Scrapbook of their trip to Okinawa, maybe one

from New York. He was pretty sure Dutch took photos. It might be fun. A little book for each trip. Maybe it'd be too sappy.

It was shocking they wanted pictures of him too. The aquarium had been a surprise and the fact that nearly every place they went didn't tell him and Kumiko to stay out of the shots. They seemed genuinely happy to have all three of them in the photos. Which made him want Kumiko to get extra copies.

He wanted to show his mom, his grandparents.

Look I was in advertising overseas.

His mom would stick that on the fridge for sure.

Frame it.

It was kind of exciting.

And he liked going through the stuff they got at the end of the day. The little souvenirs. His favorite though was the gigantic whale shark from the aquarium. It was massive. He didn't know how he'd get it home but he knew they would. He'd have to figure it out. Even if he had to hold it in his seat the whole flight. He'd just curl over it and use it as a pillow.

Maybe it was weird. 18-year-old guys didn't have plush animals in their rooms, did they? But it was a whale shark. And Johnny didn't comment. Didn't tell him they should give it to Kumiko or one of the kids in town instead. Just smiled at him and seemed to puzzle over how they were going to get it home. No festival, fair, or arcade prize would compare or live up to it.

Johnny was healing. He no longer needed his sling according to Mr. Miyagi and that was such a relief. And he was practicing sanshin.

While he did that Daniel practiced karate in the dojo with Mr. Miyagi or out near the sea, they were falling into a routine.

Practice then breakfast, then out for their adventure for the day, then back in time for dinner with everyone, maybe more practice together in the dojo, then bed.

And now that Johnny's shoulder was better Daniel didn't have to worry about being very specific and careful about how they slept. And it was a relief.

After morning practice, they met for what Kumiko said was for sure a photoshoot. Some fashion company and Daniel was excited to watch.

Modeling.

Johnny seemed unsure that it was really that. As if he wasn't aware that he was advertising perfect as if he'd forgotten that he already was in magazines back home. As if this wasn't something he knew how to do.

The designer met them, made some quick changes and an assistant got them drinks while they watched, set up chairs and an umbrella.

It was surprising.

They weren't doing anything. Just there to watch but they were treated like they were important.

He liked the fruit smoothie they'd gotten him and Kumiko was happily sipping at her iced coffee.

It was so different from the beach photoshoot. No one was oiling Johnny up with baby oil. But they were dressing Johnny up in all sorts of clothing Daniel had never seen him in. He'd seen Johnny in suits, but these were different. Layered and more complex in soft grays and with vests underneath rather than the button-ups he'd seen before. Another look they put him in was all asymmetrical monochrome and it was completely different than anything Johnny ever wore. But it made his eyes pop, all that black leaving the only color being his eyes and hair.

They styled his hair and made so many different changes. Daniel thought he could sit there all day watching them put their different outfits on Johnny. Watching him move for the photos, needing very little direction, seeming to get what they wanted just from the few words of English the photographer spoke.

"Have you modeled before?" Kumiko asked almost innocently when they let Johnny take a break and he came over to them wearing a sweater over a button-up with a collar and a fake pair of glasses that made him look like a college kid, almost a nerd, but a hot one.

"One of my friend's aunts takes pictures sometimes for a magazine, but that's not really modeling," Johnny said softly.

"Oh," Kumiko said tilting her head listening to the designer and the

photographer which had burst into animated conversation. "They want to know which one?"

Johnny frowned. "I don't know. Daniel worked on one of the sets, did Tommy tell you? I usually don't pay attention."

Daniel knew he was blushing but he mumbled the name of the magazine to Kumiko, sinking down in his chair embarrassed as she grinned and told them which spurred more exciting conversation.

"They know the magazine, they're sending their assistant to go get copies. They want to see if they can find you in it."

"I've never seen how they turned out," Johnny said.

"They're promising to send copies of these when they get printed. Oh, she's got another look for you to try on."

Daniel gently smacked her on the arm when Johnny left. "Why?" he asked.

"They were talking about what a natural he was and wondering if he'd done modeling before," she said softly to him. "Besides, they work with fashion magazine here. I thought they might have old copies. I want to see."

The assistant returned with a big box that she dumped onto a table.

"You could save her some time," Kumiko suggested.

Daniel sighed, pulling his gaze away from Johnny and walking over. The assistant looked up at him.

"I know which ones, one moment," he said flipping through them looking for the correct covers and setting them aside. The designer came back over with the photographer and Daniel flicked them open to the right pages before hurrying back to his seat. Kumiko gave his arm a gentle squeeze before walking over to look.

Johnny walked over to Daniel.

"You don't want to see them?" Daniel asked.

He looked nice, another layered suit, a hat, shiny shoes. All smooth lines that fit him well.

"No, it's okay," Johnny said taking another sip of his water. "I'm sorry

about all this."

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked.

"It's got to be so boring. Like the most boring of everything, we've done. Like the photoshoot on the beach again."

"It's not boring," Daniel said. "It's kind of fun."

"Really?" Johnny asked looking at him like he was lying. Like he didn't believe a word Daniel said.

Daniel carefully fixed the tie which was a little crooked. "It's fun to see you in all these different styles."

He paused, stopping the words from falling off his tongue, the admission. They were dating now, maybe he should say it. He looked up at him with a smile.

"You look hot. I like watching you model. The beach was different. But I also enjoyed that. Plus I got to be the one to oil you up. That was delightful."

He watched Johnny turn bright red, watched it burn his ears, and Daniel grinned putting his hands up on either side of Johnny's face, his skin was warm beneath his palms.

"Do you like doing this?" he asked.

There was something stupidly simply hot about having a model boyfriend. Saying your boyfriend was a model. But Johnny had spent so much time doing what other people wanted him to do, unable to do what he wanted that Daniel didn't want him to pick something just because he was good at it and Daniel liked the outcome.

"It's easy," Johnny said. "I don't know. I never thought about it seriously. There's this model I met a while back at one of Sid's parties and she was very busy, always had to look a certain way, any changes she wanted to make were a big deal, even changes beyond her control caused her stress. I sounded like it'd be exhausting and too much to have every little aspect of my life under a microscope."

That definitely wouldn't do. Johnny already had engraved into him following rules and strict schedules and work out schedules. He didn't need anyone else trying to take over. He should be free to do what he wanted.

"You should do what you want, across the board," Daniel said.

Kumiko scooped up a magazine and ran over, it was the first one. "Johnny! This is you?"

Johnny glanced over and the blush that had faded came back, rushing down his neck. "Y-yeah."

"You were so small!"

"Every kid starts off small," Johnny said after a moment.

"But Johnny!" Kumiko said holding up the magazine next to Johnny and looking between the two. "I didn't grow this much!" she said with a frown.

"Did you want to?" Johnny asked looking at her confused.

"You look like you could lift Daniel in his chair without a problem, but this boy looks like he'd fall over if he even tried."

"I could," Johnny said looking at the chair and Daniel.

"Do it," Kumiko said excitedly holding the magazine to her chest, eyes shining.

"I probably shouldn't in these clothes," Johnny said with a frown.

Kumiko turned away from them calling to the designer and photographer in Japanese. They set the magazines down and ran over, talking quickly.

"Okay, Daniel, do you mind being in a few pictures? You'll have to change," Kumiko said.

"Seriously?" Daniel asked.

He didn't know whether it was exciting or not. He had mixed feelings about it. He didn't want to be a prop, but it would be fun to dress up with Johnny. He didn't see why they'd want him for photos. "Okay."

The designer clapped her hands.

"Okay!" she said.

Daniel was pushed towards a pop-up changing space and passed along a suit. He'd never worn one like it. He got to see himself in a mirror

and he liked it.

He knew Italian suits were popular. His grandfather was always talking about the importance of a good suit, but this was different. He got to sit in the chair again, but they'd moved it somewhere with better lighting.

He felt nervous.

The other photos they'd done were candids. No one had cared what he looked like, he was just there as an extra.

But this time the focus was on him with the way the assistant was messing with his hair. He wasn't used to having someone paying such attention to how he looked. It was usually just him that cared so much.

Johnny walked towards him, dipping down when he got close to put his hands on the chair on either side of Daniel's hips.

"You look nice," Johnny said warmly before standing up, the chair and Daniel going up with him.

Daniel's heart was pounding, looking down at Johnny, mouth going dry. He couldn't look away from Johnny's eyes. There wasn't any stress on his face. No strain. Like this was the easiest thing to do. Daniel put his hands on the chair between his own legs shifting forward to look down at him.

How did he make it looks so easy? He tilted his head studying Johnny up close from a new view.

The sun was making his blue eyes brighter.

They'd put some makeup on him.

His lips were pinker.

Kumiko said something but Daniel didn't hear her, couldn't hear anything over his heart pounding in his ears.

He wanted to kiss him. Johnny was smiling at him. It was smug. Like he was amused.

Then too soon he was gently setting Daniel and his chair back down.

Johnny had a thoughtful look on his face and was talking to Kumiko.

The assistant came back, new clothes for Daniel to change into, and then Johnny was heading to a different spot to change. He looked more sporty, preppy and it fit the look Daniel saw at the country club that one time and when he'd come over for dinner with his Mom.

Daniel's clothes were still fancy. It was a weird combination. He didn't know what they were going for.

"So I've been practicing," Johnny said. "After you mentioned it on the beach. The kids I babysit have been helping. They've found it fun."

"What are you talking about?" Daniel asked looking at him.

"I figured they might like it for a photo shoot if they liked me just lifting you in a chair and I was right," Johnny said with a smile.

Kumiko called out to them and Johnny nodded. He moved to where the photographer was waiting. A few easy photos with easy smiles, stretching, then he got down on the ground, perfect push-ups.

Kumiko ran up to Daniel pushing him forward. "Try to look as at ease as possible. Johnny said he could do them with you on his back. They're pretty excited about it."

Johnny stopped steadying himself, stilling.

Daniel sat down on his back facing towards the photographer.

"You sure you're okay?"

"This is something I know I can do," Johnny said easily.

Daniel carefully drew his legs up, crossing them easily, settled onto Johnny's back. He was worried, nervous, but excited.

He worried about Johnny's shoulder, about him overdoing it and hurting himself. But then he moved.

Daniel could do a push-up.

He could do several.

But it wasn't something he particularly enjoyed. In gym class, the teacher always told him his form was wrong, even though the teacher never told him how to do it properly.

Johnny knew how to do it though. That was clear. Steady movement.

Up and down.

Daniel was delighted. It was as fun as he'd thought.

Maybe it was weird that he found it fun. Johnny being able to do it and so sure of himself, sent warmth through him, a thrill.

He tried to remember what Johnny had said.

He'd been practicing since Daniel had mentioned it. Before they knew they liked each other.

What had Johnny's plan been? He hadn't known Daniel liked him, even though at that moment *especially* it should've been fairly obvious.

But he'd heard the thought Daniel had about it, the curiosity, and he'd gone for it. Like all the other requests he took them to heart and went to work building up muscle and stamina so that he could do this. Push-ups in Naha with Daniel on his back. Got the kids he babysat in on it.

Daniel didn't know how many kids he babysat. But it had to be chaos. Fun though. Kids liked that kind of thing. Daniel liked that kind of thing. *This* kind of thing.

The photographer was saying something and Daniel remembered where he was, that this was a job of sorts.

Johnny was to keep going, but Daniel was supposed to change poses, to look more at ease like this was normal. Like it wasn't so wonderfully exciting.

It took everything in him to focus, to remember where he was, and to keep the big smile hidden. To look serious. To look cool. Because that was the point he realized.

They wanted him to look at ease, calm, bored like having Johnny doing push-ups under him was an everyday occurrence. Like it was any other spot to sit.

While Johnny was supposed to be showing off their sporty clothes.

He sat with his legs hanging over as Johnny pushed himself up again, ankles crossed so they could get a better shot of the fancy shiny shoes. It was fun. Daniel kind of liked modeling.

He didn't see why they'd picked him, but he liked it.

When it was over Daniel got off carefully and spun turning around and kneeling next to Johnny.

"You okay?" he asked. "How's your shoulder?"

Johnny pushed himself up, rotating his shoulders, one then the other, sitting up across from him.

"I'm good. Did you have fun?" he asked.

A check-in, *Was that what you wanted? Did I do it right?*

"Loved it," Daniel said warmly.

It was an understatement but he didn't know how to explain better how fun that had been. How it'd been everything he'd ever wanted since he'd first seen someone do it. That guy in Newark at the gym. This was a million times better. And there'd be photos. He wanted the photos. And they were dating, so this could be a thing. Maybe. He didn't want to be too greedy.

Johnny smiled at him, only glancing away when the assistant brought them waters. Kumiko walked over and sunk down to the ground next to them. "They're pretty ecstatic. They're going to send photos to the magazine back in the USA too. Also, you get to keep some of the clothes."

"I'm running out of space in my suitcase," Johnny said with a frown.

"Because of all your library books?" Daniel asked amused.

"I can't leave those behind," Johnny said with a sigh, taking the headband they'd given him off his head with a sigh. "But I also don't want to leave all the things I'm being given behind. These were altered for me," Johnny plucked at his shirt.

"I didn't think you cared about clothes," Daniel said amused.

Johnny looked at him, tilting his head trying to think.

Daniel had seen how he treated his nice suits and shoes. Like they didn't need to be cared for. It was kind of cool, but also those were like thousand-dollar suits he didn't care about, which was wasteful.

"I don't care about clothes Sid got me," Johnny said. "I care about these. I cared about that jacket, but you guys were more important than a jacket."

Daniel reached out and patted his hand. "It's okay."

"Yeah, besides, you're going home with so many nicer things," Kumiko said warmly.

"That's not why. I liked it because it was a gift from you," he said to Kumiko.

"It's okay, you still have the other shirt I got you, right?"

"Yes, Yukie helped me get the mud out of it."

Kumiko smiled. "See, it's okay."

Johnny nodded. "Thank you Kumiko," he said softly.

She smiled warmly at him, patting his shoulder gently and getting up with a stretch. The assistant talked to her and she followed the assistant over to the table where the designer was bent over a sketchpad.

"Think we're done?" Daniel asked.

"Maybe. I hope so. I'm getting tired."

"What did they put on your lips? It's not lipstick," Daniel asked looking closer.

"I don't know."

"I'm surprised you don't seem to care," Daniel said amused.

"It's common," Johnny said. "At least it's not the gloss. Sometimes Tommy's aunt recommended the gloss to get certain looks."

"*Kissing* looks?" Daniel asked amused.

"Yeah, that Kissing Potion stuff all the girls like. It doesn't add any color though. Their make-up looks are different here."

Daniel remembered the lip gloss, Ali had some. He reached out and brushed his thumb over Johnny's lip and looked on his thumb. It didn't come off. Lipstick usually came off.

"You might be stuck with that," Daniel said. "Until it wears off."

"Might be a while," Johnny said with a sigh. His cheeks were lightly

dusted in pink.

Daniel looked around. The photographer and assistant were talking, the designer was sketching. Kumiko was walking back. Damn. If only they were on their own. If only he had something to hide them with. He could kiss him.

"Ready to go?" Kumiko asked.

"We're done?" Johnny asked.

"Yup. Just change and then they'll ship the clothes to Mr. Miyagi's back in the USA. Except for a gift that they're shipping to Tomi Village."

"Gift?"

"Hopefully it'll be done by the O-bon festival," Kumiko said with a smile.

Johnny nodded, confused but not pressing it and getting up to go change into his normal clothes.

"Do you know if they can make a patch?" Daniel asked standing up.

"A patch?" Kumiko asked tilting her head.

"Mr. Miyagi has this symbol his wife made. Of a bonsai in front of a sun. It's like the dojo's design. Johnny has this jacket back home he likes but he took the patch from the old dojo off of it, because well...so I was thinking of replacing it but I don't know how to make a patch."

"Let's go ask," Kumiko said heading back to the table.

The designer listened carefully as Daniel and Kumiko explained the patch. The design of Miyagi-do. She tilted her head thoughtfully. Flipped the page and sketched out the design holding it up to Daniel. Daniel nodded showing with his hands how big it was. Explaining the jacket. He'd remembered seeing it in one of the magazines. He grabbed it, flipping through to find Johnny, and pointed it out. She nodded and spoke to Kumiko.

Kumiko smiled warmly. "She says she can do it as a gift, she's been wanting to try patches. Apparently their popular."

"Thank you. Er. Arigato," Daniel said bowing. "It's a secret, a gift for Johnny."

Kumiko nodded. "Won't say a thing. Go change. Let's go home."

Daniel nodded running off to go change back into his clothes. He'd be able to fix something for Johnny and he was excited to see Johnny's face when he saw it. Excited to see the result. The least he could do for a day he didn't think he'd ever forget.

Chapter End Notes

> I spent way too long trying to come up with cool clothing from the '80s in Japan and a lot of it wasn't as applicable as I wanted it to be. But this was a cool resource: https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/tokyo-street-fashion-and-culture-1980-2017-across/ogKCPmGdPtB7Iw?hl=en
> I also spent too much time looking at cosmetics because I wanted a lip stain and didn't know if it was used in Japan in the '80s and fell down a Kissing Potion (actual name of a lip gloss brand from the '80s in the USA) rabbit hole which really just didn't work. But I liked the name too much not to mention it.

Karate to the Death

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny thought he was ready for o-bon. Kumiko had arrived early with two boxes with the designer's logo on them and a big bag. One she delivered to Daniel before he headed to the dojo with Mr. Miyagi.

Johnny had joined them a couple of times, almost every evening now for a week with Sato. Trying to learn things like the drum technique with Daniel. To listen to Sato and Mr. Miyagi remember the things the late Mr. Miyagi had taught them when they were younger. They sparred some times and it was fascinating to watch, they looked like they were having so much fun. All the dark clouds from weeks ago fading.

"Your gift," Kumiko said warmly to Johnny.

She was already dressed in her blue kimono with a hairpin in her hair and red wrapped around her waist tied in a big bow in the back.

Johnny opened the box, then look at Kumiko.

"I thought sanshin players were supposed to wear black, and sit in the back so as not to distract from dancing and other performances."

She smiled. "True, but not in your case."

"I thought all the colorful stuff was for girls," Johnny said.

Kumiko laughed. "Pretty is pretty."

"Okay, so how do I put this on then," Johnny asked lifting it up with confusion. There were no ties, no buttons. It had to be like his gi, but he doubted he was supposed to tie it the same.

He didn't know the different types of clothing. To him, it looked like a kimono, like the type of thing Kumiko was wearing, but with more layers. The fabric was light and the sleeves were big and there was a light weight jacket in the box.

She explained and he did his best, going into another room to change into the layered robe, it was practically a dress. A complicated dress.

But it was a gift. And it was o-bon. Something Kumiko had been getting excited about since they'd met her. Something she'd worked hard on. But this was that, what was it again? What had she called it? A bingata design? Colorful print on quality breathable fabric. He got to the thing he was supposed to tie around his waist and it wasn't like his gi, it was several layers, he had to go get her help. He couldn't remember how it went, she'd explained it, but he ended up doing it like his gi and that really wasn't right.

Yukie was sitting with Kumiko, dressed in a pinkish-red and grey design on white.

"Johnny-san, let me help," Yukie said motioning for him to come over.

With deft hands, she worked on the cloth, the tie. The little bow she made like it was the easiest thing. He felt like a little kid getting help tying his shoe.

"Ryusou jacket?" Yukie asked head tilted.

"Yes, there's one here," Kumiko said passing it over, it went over his shoulders like an additional layer with big open sleeves, extra colorful.

He couldn't blend in if he tried. There was no way. He already stood out but this was like cranking it up to a thousand.

Yukie clapped her hands. "Perfect."

"*Niffee debiru* Yukie-san," Johnny said softly.

It was so complicated to him that he had no clue how she did it. She dressed like this every day. A t-shirt and jeans were so easy to just throw on. Well no, he remembered trying to get a shirt on while his shoulder was healing. Even that wasn't always easy.

"You're welcome Johnny-san," she said smiling warmly at him.

Giving him things to store in the sash around his waist, a small bag with coins for snacks she said, a handkerchief, and a fan in case it got too hot.

"Let's go early to practice," Kumiko recommended with a smile.

Johnny nodded, following her to her car. She drove them to the castle ruins where it was mostly set up with lights and drums that people were playing to a beat. Some people were dancing. A couple of people

looked like they were already drunk, carrying around bottles that they were sharing.

It was weird to walk in wooden shoes, but not difficult. They were just so loud. He was used to being quiet. Trying to be as quiet as he could be, to hide and fade into the background. This was the opposite of everything he tried to be and it made him nervous.

He helped finish a few things Kumiko asked him to help with. Hanging lanterns on some of the sturdy wiring overhead and putting other lanterns in the water.

As the afternoon turned into evening more cars arrived, more people made their way to the castle. Yukie and Mr. Miyagi came with Daniel in tow. He was wearing a red and black jacket with the Miyagi-do design on it and his white and navy flower hachi maki.

He took Johnny in and grinned.

"Is that your gift from the designer?"

"Yeah."

"Colorful," Daniel said with a smile.

Johnny couldn't tell if he was teasing or just pointing out the obvious. Johnny felt like an oversized awkward parrot. Not nearly as graceful as Kumiko who moved around in her kimono with ease.

"Come, let's dance," Kumiko said taking their hands and joining the group in the center of the castle.

Yuna was already dancing and they fell in next to her.

She grinned at them, moving with ease to the beat of the drums, the gentle turns, and the claps.

Everyone doing the same dance in rows of circles until the music stopped.

It was time.

Time for Johnny to stand in front of all these people and play sanshin while Kumiko danced.

Ichiro walked up to him, finding him as Yuna and Daniel spoke. He

pressed a sanshin into Johnny's hands.

"For Johnny-san," Ichiro said, smiling warmly.

It wasn't the well-worn one he always borrowed from Ichiro.

Johnny looked at the sanshin then up at Ichiro in shock.

"Play well."

Johnny bowed deeply. "*Niffee debiru* Ichiro-san."

Ichiro smiled and bowed back, before turning to join the others on the other side of the wooden plank.

Johnny looked at Kumiko who smiled at him. They'd done this multiple times. It'd be easy. He took his place and looked at her after tuning the sanshin, and strumming a couple of times to check. Kumiko nodded. She was ready.

He began to play. She moved slow, the way she'd done at the tea ceremony. The way she did during practice. Slow graceful movements. She opened the fan, threw it in the air, and caught it, holding the sleeves of her blue wave kimono as she danced and smiled to the music he played.

He remembered the songs. Everything Yuna and Ichiro had taught him. And he saw them sitting together smiling in the crowd. He knew there was supposed to be singing. He didn't know any of the words though. But the point was for Kumiko to dance. She'd worked so hard for so long and dancing was her dream. This stage would be just one of many for her.

Johnny heard something behind him. The sound of something approaching. But it sounded weird. Like it was coming from above which didn't make any sense.

"Behind you!" Daniel called jumping up.

Kumiko turned and Johnny heard someone land behind him. He stopped playing and turned to see Chozen.

Chozen grabbed the sides of the ryusou. He laughed, tilting his head taking in Johnny's ryusou and the sanshin Johnny held carefully in his hands.

"Look like geisha."

"You could've come in a normal way Chozen. It's not invite-only."

"Would not be welcome."

"How do you know that? Have you even talked or asked anyone?"

"Uncle said dead to each other. Will not understand. Unless make him."

He spun Johnny wrapping an arm around his neck. "Need to make him understand."

"By doing this?" Johnny asked panic rising.

It was different, but similar, an arm held tight around his neck. He remembered arguing with Kreese, moments before he'd ended up in the same position. Trying to make sense of the situation and failing. Not knowing why he was so pissed. Not understanding what he'd done wrong. He'd done more than he should've been asked. More than enough he'd thought. And it'd led to him struggling against someone bigger than him. Someone he trusted who didn't care anymore.

Chozen wasn't bigger. Didn't seem stronger. Didn't smell like cigars. It was *different* he reminded himself. Trying to calm down. Trying to breathe in the festival, the lights. It wasn't a parking lot after a tournament he'd lost.

It wasn't the Valley.

It was Okinawa.

He could smell the ocean breeze. The cologne Chozen used. The smell of festival foods he hadn't tried yet. No trophy to be grabbed from his hands. Just a sanshin, a precious gift.

He needed to remain calm. Breathe.

He could still breathe. He wasn't being choked.

"Need to fight," Chozen said quietly.

Kumiko rushed forward smacking Chozen on the head with her fan.

"Leave him alone," she said.

"Cross bridge," Chozen ordered flicking out a knife and pointing it at Johnny's neck.

Kumiko looked at them wide-eyed like she didn't want to move, but Chozen repeated himself with a shout.

"Had long time to think of what you said," Chozen said quieter as Kumiko stepped back, startled by the shout.

"And this is the result you came up with?" Johnny asked, hand coming up to the arm around his neck.

Needing to find space, to change his own position to try and calm his panicking heart. Panic was dangerous with a knife to your throat.

He could still breathe, he kept reminding himself. Breathing was important. Talking was important. Keep someone talking right? He thought he read that somewhere. Or maybe it was just a Saturday morning cartoon hero/villain thing.

The knife wasn't digging in, just pointing.

"Need you to play damsel, hmm? Will not actually hurt, but you only one that listens. Kumiko fight back. Will not listen," Chozen spoke only loud enough for him to hear.

The arm around his neck wasn't the same. He was telling the truth. It was all show, tense, but it wasn't cutting off his air, there was plenty of space. Not enough to slip out of though. Kumiko was walking carefully across the bridge directly into her aunt's arms.

"So what's your play here?" Johnny asked.

Keep talking. Talking was safe.

"Fight to the death," Chozen said.

"You *know* that's not honorable."

"They will not see me, I am ghost until I try it. I will not win. I do not wish to win. I just need one, uncle hopefully, to let me back in."

"How does that make sense?"

"Stupid honor as you say. This is fastest way."

"Who are you going to fight?"

"Only one I can."

Daniel.

Johnny's hand gripped the arm around his neck and pulled as hard as he could, tried to kick back at Chozen's feet. He knew what he was supposed to do, but he'd panicked, picked the wrong moves. Trying to escape but avoid the knife. It was harder to move in the traditional clothing. It was trapped in Chozen's grip, everything keeping him stuck.

"You can't, leave him alone, I'll fight you if you need to. Isn't a fight to the death literally to the death?"

"Better, more like distressed damsel. I won't kill him. I just need him to fight me. And he won't will he? Unless I do *something* to get his attention."

"This is a bad choice," Johnny said

"You say Miyagi *kind* . Teaches kind men. I will make it look real, but it will be safest death match in history of island."

"That sounds like a *lie*. You've lied before."

"Not lie. Misled, bent rules. This time, whole truth. Will not kill. Just fight. Only card I have left. Last play."

Chozen shifted his grip of the knife, pointing it more menacingly at Johnny's neck, shouting back to the crowd, to Daniel who was standing horrified.

"For whatever happened, I apologize," Daniel said.

"Apology will not give me back my honor."

"Well, neither will this," Daniel said moving closer.

"In their eyes it will," Chozen said motioning around them with his head.

"If you hurt him," Johnny said trying to fit as much of a warning in his tone over the panic.

"Have to, but not badly. Promise. Won't break a thing. And you, don't worry, you just rest."

Johnny frowned not sure what that meant.

Daniel was walking over the bridge.

Chozen stepped back and away from him, pulling Johnny with him.

Daniel had told him his karate wouldn't be as useful against a knife. He'd been so sure it would've been fine. But he couldn't see an opening. Not without cutting himself, which was stupid and wouldn't help anyone.

Daniel slung the bridge into the water like he was told.

Chozen took the knife, closed it, and threw it to the side. He pinched somewhere on Johnny and his legs went out from under him before he could move, before he could make a plan, and everything went dark.

Johnny woke up to the sound of drums. He pushed himself up wondering when he'd fallen. The jacket part of his traditional clothes had been thrown over him like a blanket. The sanshin was lying by his side undamaged.

He remembered the fight and turned, looking for Daniel. There was blood on the stone and he could hear the sounds of a fight. He followed it to see Daniel, bloody leaning against a stone shisa while Chozen turned, to look at the audience.

Johnny watched Daniel use the drum technique until Chozen fell to his knees.

Daniel walked up to Chozen, grabbing him by his hair. "Live or die man?"

"Die," Chozen said.

"Wrong," Daniel said taking the hand poised to strike and pinching Chozen's nose like Mr. Miyagi had done to Kreese all those months ago. He used it to propel Chozen to the ground with a "Honk."

Daniel spun on his heels running over to Johnny, sinking down in front of him.

Yukie had given Johnny a handkerchief to keep in the sash around his waist and he found it quickly dabbed at the blood near Daniel's eye

and around his mouth.

Daniel cupped Johnny's face in his hands, running a hand through his hair, like he was checking for injuries. "You okay?"

"Shouldn't I ask you that?" Johnny asked. "You're the one bleeding."

Daniel laughed softly, eyes going down, looking at Johnny's neck then lower. He grabbed the edges of the ryusou and pulled it back over his shoulder.

"You're the one who was essentially held hostage and then fainted. I just fought the asshole."

"My hero," Johnny said with a teasing laugh. "I didn't faint, he did something weird."

"Weird?" Daniel asked sitting up suddenly, holding the fabric tightly in his hands turning to look at Chozen who hadn't gotten up. Across the way Mr. Miyagi and Sato were trying to find something to use as a bridge to get across. "Maybe I *should* kill him."

Johnny grabbed Daniel's hand in his. "Don't, just stay here with me."

Daniel sighed. "I was so worried. He had a knife to your neck."

Johnny debated telling him that Chozen was just trying to get his uncle's attention, going about it the worst possible way. Like the worlds most dangerous toddler throwing a tantrum. That they were just pawns in some stupid game. With no plans to hurt them except to make it *look* like it. Daniel wouldn't like that.

"Because I knew you'd win," Johnny said.

"How could you have known? I didn't even know," Daniel said. He was shaking. "I thought I might have to kill him. That I might die or you. You didn't get up. You weren't moving."

"I'm fine," Johnny said. "I'll even wiggle my fingers and toes and count however many fingers you want to hold up."

Daniel laughed. "Okay, I get it. You really thought I had him from the go?"

"He definitely has underestimated you every step of the way," Johnny said.

"Maybe he got distracted," Daniel said.

"Yeah by what?"

Daniel poked him in the chest, finger tip to bare skin. The ryusou had fallen open again, kept falling open after Chozen had grabbed it.

"Okay I get it," Johnny said swatting at his hand. "I'll have to ask Yukie or someone how to fix it."

"Like an old novel cover," Daniel said with a laugh.

"Didn't we already establish the my hero joke?" Johnny asked, relieved that the haunted look in Daniel's eyes had left and that they were warm again.

Daniel lifted the jacket up covering them from view, from the chaos of everyone trying to figure out how to get across, creating a small little world of just the two of them.

He leaned close and whispered. "Heroes usually get some kind of reward, don't they?"

"There is usually something," Johnny said thoughtfully. "Every single story, can't remember what it is."

"Liar," Daniel said with a soft laugh. His hand reached gently to cup the side of Johnny's face. He leaned forward and Johnny grabbed the front of the red jacket Daniel was wearing, pushing forward towards him, and gently pulling Daniel closer, so they met in the middle.

It was soft and warm. Based on the way Daniel was moving, the way his tongue flicked out to brush against Johnny's lips, the way he seemed hungry, almost starving for a kiss Johnny was pretty sure his mouth was fine despite the blood he'd wiped away earlier. Shouldn't have even worried about it.

It reminded him of their first kiss, but not as drunk, not tasting of beer and pizza.

Sweeter.

Johnny felt almost dizzy. He heart pounding. This would be a problem. He wouldn't want to stop.

He liked kissing. He'd forgotten almost how much he liked it. And

Daniel was good at it. He felt breathless but he didn't want to stop and he was disappointed when Daniel leaned back to catch his own breath, looking pleased, happy in the warm dark under the jacket. Johnny wanted to chase Daniel back, to kiss him again but he felt the vibrations of something land on the stone. Heard the sound of feet rushing over. Daniel leaned forward again, a quick peck before taking down the jacket, covering Johnny in it and standing.

Daniel held out his hand to Johnny and Johnny took it standing.

"You sure you're okay?" Johnny asked as he watched Sato rushed towards Chozen, anger, and concern on his face.

Chozen looked frightened but then Sato pulled the boy into a hug. "I'm sorry."

"Just a little bruised and battered, but I'm fine. Nothing broken," Daniel said.

Johnny saw the look of relief in Chozen's eyes, the almost tears that he hid burying his head in his uncle's shoulder.

Mr. Miyagi and Yukie and Kumiko rushed over to them. Mr. Miyagi had a first aid kit in his hands.

Kumiko threw her arms around the both of them.

"Boys okay?" Mr. Miyagi asked.

"Yes Mr. Miyagi," Daniel said. Mr. Miyagi went to work bandaging him up.

"Yukie-san could you help me?" Johnny asked.

"Yes?" she asked concern in her voice. Johnny pointed out the disarray of his ryusou under his jacket. She laughed and fixed it with ease.

The music began again and Johnny looked at Kumiko who smiled, ready for take two. He wiggled his fingers, he could try. He picked up the sanshin and strummed it a few more times. Daniel refused to cross back over the bridge with the others and sat out of the way watching, head in his hands. While Kumiko resumed dancing and Johnny played. A little further, but not out the light of the festival Chozen and Sato were sitting together to the side, talking. Sato patching up the wounds with a first aid kit. Maybe things would be okay.

Chapter End Notes

So kimono's which are worn in the rest of Japan have their bows in the back, while Okinawan traditional clothing have the bows in the front. I'm not sure which look they were trying to go for in the movie, it seemed to be general kimono's. (Except Ichiro who for some reason was wearing an apron????) (honestly slowing down to watch the fight scene and taking in the background characters was kind of fun, not just catching Ichiro in an apron hanging out with Yuna, but also a super bored kid falling asleep next to a teapot and noticing that the musicians weren't playing sanshin but shamisen, which is interesting because they clearly knew about the sanshin since Daniel has one in the beginning of the third movie, but I'm being nitpicky)

There's a couple of different styles when it comes to Okinawan/ Ryukyuan ryusou/ traditional clothing but I couldn't find any good examples that weren't just pure black or with mild designs for guys. Sanshin players from the images I saw would wear black with little gold caps. Which was so different from the colorful bingata that I decided to rebel.
Here's a website where they compare the two (kimono's and ryusou): https://sakura.co/blog/ryusou-okinawa-traditional-dress/

Going Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took a while for Daniel to heal, but Johnny worked diligently, fussing over bandages and putting the medicine Mr. Miyagi gave him on his skin. Lots of sprays and bandaids.

Daniel learned a trick. If he complained about the pain Johnny would give him a very soft and gentle kiss.

He abused this knowledge every chance he got.

He wanted to tell Kumiko *Ha did not take until I was 50!*

But she had other things to worry about. Like some application to a Tokyo dance troupe that Chozen had found her as an apology. She was so excited about it that she nearly forgave Chozen on the spot. She at least warmed up to him. Which was further than Daniel had gotten.

Chozen was *around* and Daniel was not a fan. He came by with Sato sometimes in the evening. Helped Yukie with gardening. Helped Mr. Miyagi make repairs, some of which were his fault in the first place. And Sato stood over him, watching, arms folded, keeping an eye on him. Like even he didn't fully trust leaving Chozen alone unsupervised.

He was also working in the vegetable fields helping get them into some sort of semblance of normal, working to help the villagers get ready to plant summer vegetables and fruit. Something about it being warm almost all year long meant they could grow other things and make up for lost time.

Chozen even brought pineapple plants in which Daniel had to admit he was curious about. He'd never seen one up close. Hadn't realized they grew the way they did, for some reason thinking they were like a tree. He'd given Yukie a tiny one for her garden at the Miyagi's. It was so small it was kind of cute. Like a bonsai, but not a tree.

They didn't talk much. Usually just a nod of their heads at each other. But Chozen did occasionally ask Daniel about other people.

Fairly early on he asked Daniel about Johnny's arm, walking over to him dressed for farming and not in his barely buttoned short-sleeved shirts.

"How Johnny-san hurt arm? Better now?"

"You dislocated it."

Chozen's eyes widened in shock. "Me? How?"

"While sparring, when you came to *leave a message,* remember?"

"Dislocating *hurts*. Army men yell in pain when happen. Johnny-san not make a sound," Chozen said.

"Yeah, and he didn't make a peep when he hurt it worse trying to save Yuna and falling from the bell tower. He's too used to getting hurt," Daniel said with a frown.

"How...his old sensei?" Chozen asked.

"And kids from his old schools and his step-father."

"Give me names," Chozen said holding out his hand, leaning against his rake. "I destroy them."

"Aren't you supposed to be learning and trying to lead a peaceful life?" Daniel asked, folding his arms.

Chozen leaned the rake forward so the wooden end pointed at Daniel. "You take Johnny-san into dojo, but not defeat his enemies. They will come back. Must squash like bugs. His enemies will become yours. Old sensei will come back, bite harder. Must befriend enemies or destroy them."

"I get the urge, I do, but it's illegal in the USA to go around killing people."

"Coward," Chozen said but there wasn't any menace in it. No edge to it. It was teasing.

Someone called out to Chozen and he nodded to Daniel before turning and going back to work.

A few days later Mr. Miyagi told them over dinner that he thought it

was time they head home.

Daniel was bubbling with a million questions and he let them out.

He wanted to know when, *soon*, if Yukie was coming with, *she wasn't*. Why wasn't she? *She didn't want to leave Okinawa, felt too old.* Then...why was Mr. Miyagi coming home with them? *Home was LA*.

It frustrated Daniel.

On the one hand, he was happy Mr. Miyagi was coming home with them. But to be separated by an ocean again after 40 years, felt heartbreaking tragic. But both Yukie and Mr. Miyagi were all soft warm smiles.

"Could you do that?" Daniel asked Johnny.

He was reading a book, laying on the floor on his back. He set the book down on his chest and looked up where Daniel was sitting next to him.

"Do what?"

"Not see each other for forty years and then after a month of knowing those feelings are still there to go our separate ways?"

Johnny pushed himself up. "No," he said kissing him and then laying back down.

Maybe Johnny could kiss him while doing sit-ups. *Focus*.

"What are you reading?" Daniel asked.

It was a different book than all the other ones he'd seen in Johnny's bag. It wasn't a library book.

"*The Tales of Genji.* One of my English teachers mentioned it. The first book that was ever written."

"Not another *old* one," Daniel complained.

What was with Johnny and reading old books?

"Not just old, *oldest*."

"Where'd you pick it up?" Daniel asked.

He hadn't seen Johnny go to a book store. But maybe Yukie took him or something. She seemed like a person who'd take Johnny to good bookstores.

"Chozen brought it over. I guess Kumiko told him about all the books we brought with us."

"*You* brought a lot of books. I brought *one* book," Daniel said. "Why'd you take anything from Chozen? It could be poisoned."

"How do you poison a book?"

"I don't know."

"I won't eat it. Promise."

Daniel sighed sinking down next to him. "That's not what I meant."

"I know," Johnny said, a teasing smile on his lips, turning his head to look at him. Daniel rolled over and kissed him. "Are you ready to go home?"

"Kind of. I like it here. But I miss-"

"Your bonsai?" Daniel teased.

"Yes. How about you?"

"I'm so ready to be home. I miss a lot of stuff. Like driving."

"And your mom?"

"That's a given like I'm sure you miss yours."

"Yeah," Johnny said softly.

He got a faraway look in his eyes. The original plan Daniel knew. That Johnny had planned to spend his summer with Bobby, staying at the Browns. He hadn't planned to go home that often. Hadn't even told his Mom he was in Okinawa.

When did he expect to see her again?

Daniel was pretty sure he'd see his mother soon. He wanted to surprise her. Thought he might tell her the wrong day just to see her face when he walked through the door. She'd be delighted.

He took Johnny's hand in his. Maybe going home wasn't going to be as easy as he thought.

The days passed quickly. They met up with Kumiko and went to the beach.

Daniel watched as Johnny surfed, as Kumiko promised, on a borrowed board.

He looked so at ease cutting through the water. Balanced. Kumiko laughed saying it *must* be like riding a bike.

Johnny asked Daniel if he wanted to learn and he did, but he wanted to wait till they were home. For the moment he wanted to enjoy the view. Wanted to do some snorkeling. He could surf at home. But he couldn't see the same things in the water, not the coral and the colorful fish.

Kumiko joined him in and after a while so did Johnny and it was fun to point things out to each other in the water. To walk along the beach after and eat ice cream.

When it was time to go Daniel was surprised by how sad he felt. How excited he was to be home. How bittersweet it was.

Ichiro gave him a sanshin. Told him to play with Johnny. Yuna hugged them both with tears in her eyes and little boxes were pressed into Johnny's arms by people that Daniel didn't know.

Sato drove them even though Mr. Miyagi said they could take a taxi but Sato refused to hear of it.

Daniel thought they might get away without having to say goodbye to Chozen but at the airport, Chozen was already waiting and Daniel had a momentary fear that he was coming with them. Like they'd *never* get rid of them. But instead, he put a box of cookies in Daniel's hands.

"They're called chinsuko," he said.

"Thanks," Daniel said looking at them then up at Chozen in surprise.

Mr. Miyagi and Sato were talking in Japanese. Yukie was dabbing tears from her eyes. Chozen turned to Johnny.

"If you ever come back, let me know. I'll pick you up. Real this time."

"Thanks," Johnny said.

Chozen shoved his hands in his pockets with a shrug. "And if Daniel-san breaks up with you, come back."

"Not happening," Daniel said stepping between the two of them.

Chozen tilted himself so he could see Johnny around Daniel. "Or if he dies, just come back to Okinawa."

"Hey!" Daniel said. "Listen, it took nearly 6 months, you are not-whatever you're doing."

Chozen laughed softly. "Visit again okay?"

He said it to Daniel that time too, catching him off-guard.

"Yeah, maybe, it's kind of expensive. And *someone* spent all their money getting us here."

"It was worth it," Johnny said.

"You did what?" Kumiko gasped smacking Johnny on the arm.

"It was round trip tickets, and it was an emergency and it was worth it," Johnny said rubbing his arm gently. "So now it's your turn, *you've* got to visit us."

"We will," Chozen said. "Maybe when Kumiko is on break from the troupe. Vacation."

She looked at him with a frown. "Maybe," she said.

She gave Johnny a big hug.

"Be careful okay?"

He nodded.

"Thank you for showing us around, and driving us around, and putting up with us. Sorry for the danger. Have fun dancing. Tell us all about it, okay?"

She laughed, tears in her eyes as Johnny pulled away to say goodbye to Sato and Yukie.

"Thank you for everything," Daniel said softly.

Kumiko laughed, short and watery, brushing tears from her eyes.

"Thank *you* for everything. It was a bit messed up the way it happened, but I do get to follow my dream now, because of you."

"You're going to be amazing," Daniel said pulling her into a hug.

It was a long one, he'd miss her a lot.

He'd miss the island, the clean air, the beautiful waters, and Tomi Village.

After a few more goodbyes, tearful hugs with Yukie, and an awkward but less crushing handshake with Chozen and Sato they were off.

After their luggage went through, when they checked in, Johnny took Daniel's hand.

He was kind of shocked, surprised Johnny just took his hand in public.

He had seemingly no desire to let go.

Daniel had done it countless times, but it was *different* when Johnny did it.

"You're okay with this?" Daniel asked softly as they walked with Mr. Miyagi to their gate.

"With what?"

"Anyone knowing?"

Johnny studied him curiously.

"I don't care."

"So I could tell *anyone* I wanted?"

"Tell everyone you want."

Daniel grinned at that.

The flight home was faster. Daniel slept for most of it, sitting in the middle leaning against Johnny who sat in the aisle seat, holding his hand for as much of the flight as he could.

They grabbed all their bags when they landed, hands too full to hold

each other's hands.

Daniel started talking fast. Complaining already about the smog and telling Mr. Miyagi that he'd told his mother another day. It was a brilliant plan and he couldn't wait.

After a moment he realized Johnny had stopped.

He turned.

Johnny was holding the whale shark and was pale, eyes wide looking in another direction.

Daniel turned back shifting the bags in his arms and grabbing Johnny's hand pulling him along.

"Where'd you park the Avanti?"

It took Johnny a moment, looking behind them still before turning back around and telling him which lot.

It felt like home now, not just because of the smog but seeing the Avanti.

Daniel couldn't wait to see his mother, surprise her and tell her everything they'd seen and done.

Mr. Miyagi sat in the back with the whale shark plush and they put all of the rest of their stuff in the trunk.

Daniel sunk into the passenger seat stretching out with a sigh.

"I missed the Avanti," he said running his hands over the dash.

"Yeah?" Johnny asked turning on the car and pulling from the lot.

"I can stretch out."

"So South Seas first?" Johnny asked.

"Yes," Daniel said. "Mom should be back from Fresno, the guys said she managed to change the job location and got transferred back home."

Daniel turned to talk to Mr. Miyagi as Johnny drove them to the apartment complex.

He was worried about Mr. Miyagi who seemed ready to go back to work and his life.

He was worried it was all for show, but he wasn't sure.

Mr. Miyagi looked relaxed.

They hadn't talked about it and Daniel was a little worried.

Daniel's Mom was home again, which meant *he'd* be back to living at South Seas, not Mr. Miyagi's house.

He didn't know if Mr. Miyagi would let Johnny stay in the guest house or if Johnny would go to Bobby's.

Would he go home?

Daniel didn't know. But he'd see him. He knew that.

Johnny pulled up in front of South Seas where workers were hard at work demolishing it.

"What?" Daniel whispered looking at the building, getting out.

Mr. Miyagi set the whale shark in the passenger seat with a frown as Mrs. Milo who had been waiting out front with her luggage and dog talked about how the owner was tearing the place down and they were all getting kicked out.

"What do you guys want to do?" Johnny asked.

"Have to clear out stuff," Mr. Miyagi said.

"I gotta call my Mom," Daniel said.

"Should I meet you back at Mr. Miyagi's then?" Johnny asked. "Or do you want me to come with you?"

"Let's meet at Mr. Miyagi's," Daniel said.

Johnny turned to Mr. Miyagi.

"I hope you don't mind, I asked the guys to keep an eye on your place. If there's anything wrong, if they messed up I take responsibility and will try to fix it."

"Hai, thank you, Johnny-san," Mr. Miyagi said.

"You need a lift somewhere?" Johnny was asking Mrs. Milo.

"I ordered a taxi but it's late, so yes," she said getting into the backseat with her dog that jumped up to lick the side of Johnny's face.

"Okay, I'll see you later," Johnny said.

Daniel had left all of his stuff in the Avanti.

He regretted telling Johnny he'd meet him Mr. Miyagi's.

He pushed through the gate.

It was all going to be gone.

The pool he never got to use, apartment 20, Mrs. Milo, and her dog already were gone.

He was sure Freddy was also gone.

Mr. Miyagi headed off to his workshop and Daniel headed up to apartment 20 getting his keys out of his pocket.

"Ma! I'm home!" he called.

The apartment was empty.

He *knew* she wasn't there, but he'd hoped he'd misunderstood.

That she wouldn't have just left.

That maybe she was still home packing.

It was empty not just of his mother, but all their stuff.

He walked through the kitchen, everything was gone, all the spices, all the food in the fridge, the eggs and milk they hadn't had time to deal with.

Their couch was gone, their TV, all the photos, the photo albums.

He walked down the hall to his room.

His bed was gone. His trophy was gone, the posters were off the wall, it was just an empty room.

He remembered the lady had told him to call his uncle's, which he'd thought was silly.

The guys had said Mom was home.

But it was clear he'd gotten *home* wrong.

He thought *this* was his home and now it wasn't any longer.

He called his uncle Louie's and sat down on the empty floor of their apartment.

She explained that Uncle Louie was sick so she'd gone back to New Jersey to help care for him.

He felt his heart sink. She didn't know how long she'd be gone. Asked quietly about his trip.

"What happened to all our stuff?" Daniel asked looking around the empty apartment.

"The boys came by and got it all for us."

"The boys?"

"Your friends. Jimmy said he could store it all at his place," Lucille said.

"Ma! You let them go through all of our stuff?" Daniel thought about his magazines.

The stack of pictures of Johnny in his desk.

He was glad only for a moment that she wasn't there, knew he was blushing as bright as Johnny got sometimes.

Tommy had given him *some* of those, but not all of it. That had been Tommy's aunt, it hadn't been discussed. And the other guys didn't know. None of it was in pristine condition anymore. And he'd taken the only one Tommy had given him to Okinawa. So all the back issues made him look like a damn stalker without any explanation.

"I asked them to when it seemed you'd be in Okinawa for who knows how long. Told them where the spare key was and they got it all done fairly fast and efficiently from what I could tell when I stopped by on my way back here. I'm sorry I'm not there to welcome you home kiddo, but we'll see each other soon. Just stay with Mr. Miyagi and enjoy college okay?"

"Okay," Daniel said softly.

"Love you."

"Love you too," Daniel said hanging up and laying down on his back in the empty apartment.

He couldn't believe it was all gone.

He was tired of moving.

He wanted to put down roots.

He pushed himself up again and walked around, checking to see if they'd missed anything.

His closet was empty, the bathroom was empty, his mother's room was empty.

He'd never seen it like that.

His mother had had their stuff sent ahead, it'd already been partially set up by movers when he arrived.

It was echoey and weird to see empty.

He opened the front door realizing it'd be the last time he'd ever be there.

There'd be no more dinners there with his mom, no sitting with her on the couch watching her murder mysteries, no sitting in his room listening to the radio while doing homework, and no more dinners with Johnny that his mom had made, no having the guys over.

Never again would he come back to apartment 20.

He set the key on the kitchen counter and shut the door heading down to Mr. Miyagi's.

It was empty except for Mr. Miyagi when he arrived.

"The guys clear out your workshop too?" Daniel asked.

Mr. Miyagi held up a note. "Seems so."

"Should we go to your place then?" Daniel asked.

He held up the keys to the Ford.

Mr. Miyagi nodded.

Daniel drove, fingers on the steering wheel feeling antsy.

He wanted to see Johnny.

Wanted to see that Mr. Miyagi's place was in one piece.

Needed something normal and not shifting underneath him.

What would they do now?

Mr. Miyagi's job was gone.

He'd come all the way home from Okinawa only to lose his job and the semblance of normalcy it gave.

There were more cars in the lot than Daniel expected.

It looked like Johnny had just arrived.

He was leaning into the trunk getting their things out.

Daniel hopped out of the Ford.

"Did you get to talk to your mom?" Johnny asked hauling bags over his shoulders.

One looked lighter.

He'd probably returned his library books before he came back.

Nerd.

"She's back in Jersey, taking care of my uncle in Parsippany," Daniel said. "Whole place is empty. It was weird."

"She moved everything out already?"

"Apparently Jimmy has all my stuff. They emptied out Mr. Miyagi's workshop too," Daniel said motioning to Mr. Miyagi who was walking up the steps with a thoughtful look on his face.

The door opened and there was a little pop of confetti that fell on Mr. Miyagi.

"Welcome home Mr. Miyagi! Made you a welcome home cake!"

"Ah! Hello," Mr. Miyagi said with a laugh as Bobby helped him with his bags and the other guys darted out into the lot towards them at a full sprint, taking things from Johnny and sweeping him up in a hug. Grabbing Daniel and pulling him in.

"How dare you just leave without any warning!" Dutch complained.

"I called and told you," Johnny said

"That wasn't enough time! We had all this shit planned and you weren't here for it!"

"We missed you," Tommy said.

"We did get a lot done though," Jimmy said.

Bobby finished talking to Mr. Miyagi.

Daniel felt them start to tilt, collapsing in a pile as he joined the hug with more force than expected.

Daniel laughed, glad his hands were empty.

"Okay okay, yes missed you too, get off!" Johnny said struggling.

"You've never been gone before, like ever, suck it up," Bobby said.

Johnny sighed and stopped wiggling.

"We're glad you're both alive," Tommy said.

"I'm glad *you're* all alive."

"I think he just wants to check that we didn't kill his bonsai," Dutch said with a laugh.

"Your bonsai is *fine* Johnny. Everything is fine. We may be degenerates but we also know how to house watch properly. Daniel, did you chat with your mom?" Bobby asked.

"Yeah, she said you all cleared out our apartment and I saw you got Mr. Miyagi's workshop too."

"We did, Mr. Miyagi's stuff is here and yours is kind of spread out in a couple of our guest rooms, and in another spot," Jimmy said sitting up and plopping down in the dirt. "We've kept fairly busy, so honestly we didn't get to do as much fun stuff as we wanted. I think you had more

fun than we did."

Bobby sighed sitting up as well. "A lot of shits been going on, but we're just happy to see you both in one piece."

They all pulled away and helped them up, helping gather up their things to carry off towards the house.

"We kind of took over Mr. Miyagi's place as a central hub," Tommy said picking up the sanshin carefully. "What are these?"

"Sanshin, it's like a three-string snakeskin banjo," Daniel said.

"Ah hell yeah," Dutch said looking over Tommy's shoulder at the instrument. "Oh man, look at all this stuff. Did you leave anything in Okinawa? Wait where's the girl? I thought you befriended a girl? Where's Kumiko?"

"She's going to Tokyo,"

"Aw man, Tommy's the only one who got to talk to her."

"It's probably for the best," Johnny said with an amused smile.

They followed the guys into the house. It was definitely decorated to welcome them home. A giant banner up on the wall and a cake on the table.

Mr. Miyagi was outside in the back. The guys kept walking out and Daniel and Johnny followed them into the backyard.

"We also finished the guest house. How'd we do Mr. Miyagi?" Jimmy asked.

"Boys do by self?" Mr. Miyagi asked, arms behind his back inspecting the work.

"Yeah, we got some pointers and had professionals check over our work. Dutch nearly electrocuted himself setting up the wiring. But it's all up to code," Bobby said.

Mr. Miyagi pushed the door open and took off his shoes, going in and looking around. He came out after a while. "Boys did good job."

Daniel watched them break out into big smiles.

"Thank you Mr. Miyagi!"

"We saw your design on the table, so we hope we followed it right."

"Tried to follow your instructions to the letter."

"Good good," Mr. Miyagi said with a nod, motioning for Johnny and Daniel.

Mr. Miyagi patted the doorway. "Guesthouse for boys. Mother in Jersey. College here," Mr. Miyagi said looking at Daniel. "Stay here."

He turned to Johnny. "If want, stay here too."

Daniel hoped he'd say yes. Wanted him to stay. Wanted to curl up next to him whenever he could. He wasn't ready to let go of him just yet. After a month of being by his side, he wanted to keep it that way.

"Thank you Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said turning to Daniel. "Is it okay?"

"Yes, of course," Daniel said.

How was that not obvious?

But Johnny smiled warmly at him and it was perfect.

Mr. Miyagi nodded, walking out. "Miyagi make tea."

Daniel grabbed his bags and took off his shoes, carefully walking into the guest room.

"Mr. Miyagi's notes said it was for Daniel, so we brought some of your furniture over," Jimmy said leaning against the door while Johnny carried more of their stuff in.

It was like the rest of the house. Tatami mats and Japanese style with light wood. But Daniel's stuff was there. Not all of it.

His bed, his desk, and chair.

They'd built a closet and Daniel opened it looking at his clothes hanging up.

He turned, they were grinning from the doorway, waiting impatiently to hear if they'd done a good job.

"Thank you," Daniel said warmly.

"Johnny-san, mother here," Mr. Miyagi called.

Daniel froze glancing at Johnny.

All the excitement, all the hope, fleeing.

She was here to take him home, wasn't she?

Was he in trouble for leaving the country without her permission?

Was he going to have to go back to the mansion?

If he spoke to her would she let Johnny stay?

If he explained the danger of taking him back?

Johnny set his things down gently and left towards where Mr. Miyagi had called out to him.

"Dude you turned so pale, it's fine," Dutch said sinking down onto the floor picking up one of the sanshin and strumming it.

"Yeah, his Mother's cool."

"I-" Daniel frowned. Johnny had technically given him permission to tell whomever he wanted. "I don't want him to go home."

"I get that," Bobby said with a sigh. "But he won't be."

Daniel sat his things down. "She doesn't like me particularly much."

"Where'd you get that idea?"

"The first time we met."

"Listen, she's intimidating, she's super protective of Johnny and honestly I think she's used to people being mean to him. I mean I got the thirty questions the first time *I* met her," Bobby said.

"And she was *scary* after the tournament," Tommy said. "Showed up at my house the grill me on every little detail I could remember about Kreese and the way he taught at Cobra Kai. She also told my aunt and uncle about what Kreese did. They were so upset. I was almost grounded."

"Yeah but she was gathering intel for her case," Jimmy said. "She cleared out Cobra Kai faster than any of us ever could have dreamed. Got the parents to withdraw every kid, nearly got it shut down."

"Why *isn't* it shut down?" Dutch asked picking up the whale shark and staring at it eyes wide. "This thing is fucking huge, how'd you even get it back?"

"Determination," Daniel said.

"There's a lot of money behind it. Like a lot. Whoever *actually* owns Cobra Kai has ungodly power and funding. But Kreese can't be the face of it anymore. She's done as much as she can until whoever owns it fucks up," Jimmy said.

"How do you know?" Daniel asked.

"Oh god, don't ask him that," Bobby said with a groan.

Jimmy grinned puffing up. "I've gotten to intern with her lawyers. I've gotten to talk to my school's dean and I'm going to get to skip ahead some steps."

"And there's a *girl*," Tommy said rolling his eyes.

"Jennifer," Jimmy said with a sigh. "She's been in my orientation classes and she's been helping me research in the library."

"We're sick of hearing about Jennifer," Dutch said. "Summer's not even over and this bastard is already back in school. Fucking nerd."

"Some of us have dreams and plans."

"Yeah yeah, all you *have* are dreams bud, she's not giving you the time of day."

"I'm working on it. I've got a plan. I'm trying to be like Tommy."

"Tommy's been after the same girl since he was five and failed. Don't be like Tommy, you'll never get laid," Dutch said

"Hey!" Tommy said.

"Sorry man, you're so fucking picky."

"Well some of us don't want to catch something."

"I haven't caught jack shit," Dutch said, arms folded.

"Daniel, tell us some good news, something, anything, this is going to spiral into a nightmare," Bobby pleaded.

"Johnny and I are dating."

Daniel hadn't meant to say it. He'd thought about it. Thought about telling them. But also thought that even though Johnny had given him permission to tell *anyone* that maybe they should talk about that in more detail. And he was tired from the flight and it was all he could think of.

This room was theirs.

And Johnny was his and these were their friends and he'd just said it.

Oh god.

Maybe he could run.

"I'm going to murder him," Dutch said getting up and turning towards the door.

Tommy grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled him down.

Dutch whirled. "How long?"

"How long?" Daniel asked confused.

"Have you been dating?" Bobby asked.

"Almost a month," Daniel said.

He couldn't tell how he should've been feeling.

He couldn't tell how they were taking it.

"I'm going to murder him," Dutch said getting up again only for Tommy to yank him down again.

He whirled. "Let me go you bastard! A month?! A fucking month! He called almost every damn day and not a peep. I had to listen to a fucking cooking guide over the phone about some damn bitter gourd that we don't even have here and he didn't say a damn word."

"I *know*," Tommy said. "But calm down."

"Calm down!? All the fucking shit that's happened while they've been gone. And that! That would've been something to call home about."

"He doesn't know about all that."

"He does too! He fucking *lived* it!"

Tommy grimaced.

Bobby sighed. "You're freaking out Daniel."

Dutch grumbled a bit, settling back down. "How long have you liked him? Give us the details since Johnny didn't, the bastard."

"He's probably *going* to tell us," Jimmy said. "Just Daniel beat him to it, I mean he hasn't even gotten a chance to see his bonsai yet."

"Yeah yeah, details Daniel, details," Dutch said waving Jimmy off.

Daniel took a deep breath, calming down.

He thought he'd play it off cool.

Tell them about it like it wasn't a big deal.

But he was too damn happy about it.

So he told them. About Johnny telling him in the middle of a storm, about the, what felt like thousands of dates that weren't dates but might've been dates.

Dutch rolled onto his back with his hands on his face with a groan and a string of curses when Daniel said how long he'd liked Johnny.

After a bit he popped up again. "I fucking knew it. I *knew* you were flirting."

"Johnny made compelling arguments against it though, it was easy to believe him," Bobby said with a sigh. "He was so stubborn it was hard to argue with him."

"You knew?" Daniel asked. "About Johnny liking me?"

"Yeah, I mean there wasn't actually any construction happening to the other bedroom at the lodge," Jimmy said.

"And we took my van so you'd have to sit together," Dutch said. "Same with lunch."

"It's why I invited you to help with the photo shoot," Tommy said with a smile.

"So you were only nice to me because you knew Johnny liked me?"

"No," Bobby said quickly.

"At first," Dutch said. "But you're cool man, we like you anyway."

"Anyway," Jimmy asked with a laugh, "what does that mean?"

"ANY way, whether he went for Johnny or not," Dutch said. "What do you think I meant?"

"Nothing man," Jimmy said shaking his head. "Congrats by the way. Better late than never."

Jimmy stood and stretched. "We should probably go see what's happening, huh?"

Daniel couldn't believe they not only took it well but that they'd known. That they'd tried to get them together all along. That they liked him whether or not he was with Johnny. But that they liked him with Johnny too. Maybe the rest of summer, the rest of the year would go by as a dream.

Chapter End Notes

> Okay so there's a sneaky joke in here that I have to explain. And it's kind of nsfw...I mean this is rated M, I think we're fine.
> So awhile back when Johnny was over at Daniel's home eating what his mother made I was doing research on all this Italian food and the seven veil's cake is all about lust, and cannolli's, y'all, cannolli's are dirty. They're just food versions of dicks. (which makes that whole scene dirtier? I don't know you decide?)
> Here's some reading about that: https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20210113-the-erotic-origins-of-italys-most-famous-sweet and well here's a quote from the article "Men would give the tubular sweet to women to hint at their sexual desires, singing, "Ogni cannolu è scettru d' ogni Re... lu cannolu è la virga di Mosè," (Every cannolo is the sceptre of every king… the cannolo is the penis of Moses)."
> Does that make Daniel flirting and giving these to Johnny worse or better? No clue. You decide.
> Sharing that with you now because (I forgot if I did before or not) Chozen gives Daniel chinsukou...which is ALSO a play on words and slang for dicks. So Chozen essentially was kind of rude in his gift. Or that was what I was going for. Like one of those sneaky ways to flip people off. Looks nice to everyone but Chozen gets

his own little joke, like bye Daniel enjoy a box of dicks. But you know, read it as you want.
And in Okinawa they serve these at tea ceremonies and they're nice little shortbread cookies so it's not always meant that way, but also...they're sold in packaging as like a joke that they ARE dicks so in some gift boxes they're shaped...well... like dicks.
Anyway, I'm sorry but I needed someone else to know all of this too. And didn't know if tumblr would flag it all or not... I just thought it was kind of funny that I kept running into it. Like what are the odds?
Here's a link, someone took a picture of the cookies and explains it: https://www.onookinawa.com/2017/03/03/chinsukou

We'll Find a Good Spot

Laura stood in the kitchen of Mr. Miyagi's home with a large bag over her shoulder. She was in the process of setting her bag down and talking to Mr. Miyagi when Johnny entered.

"Hi honey," she said with a warm smile holding out her arms. "Welcome home."

Johnny gave her a big hug breathing in her perfume and hairspray.

She ruffled his hair, giving him a big hug back.

"Heard you went on quite the adventure. Why don't you tell me about it?"

He stepped back and she pulled out a container of ice cream from the bag and some root beer.

He smiled, she'd even brought her own scoop and glasses.

"Mr. Miyagi do you want a root beer float?" Laura asked warmly.

"Small one," Mr. Miyagi said.

"Whose all here? I spotted some of the guy's cars," Laura said scooping out ice cream into glasses.

"6 not counting you or me," Johnny said.

"Glad I assumed properly," she said shooting him a smile.

"I get boys," Mr. Miyagi said walking off towards the guest house.

"Did you get hurt?" she asked.

"Dislocated my shoulder, but it was an accident. I'm all better now thanks to Mr. Miyagi. Daniel got pretty hurt though."

She twisted the caps off the tops of the root beer, flicking them with ease into the trashcan at the other end of the room.

"Any progress on that front?"

Johnny nodded, heart pounding in his chest, knowing his face was probably too easy to read.

Laura grinned, "I'm going to want to know about that too you know."

"I know," Johnny said softly.

"And you're hoping to live here *together?*" she asked raising an eyebrow with an amused smile on her lips.

"*And* Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said quickly.

She laughed. "Moving in together is a big step."

"We spent a month sharing a room in Tomi Village."

"Vacation is different," she said pouring the root beer into each of the glasses and setting them out with a straw and spoon.

"I know."

"Do you know what you want to do?" she asked taking a seat at the table, curling her legs under her on the floor.

"I don't. But I did some modeling while we were there."

"I thought you didn't want to model."

"I didn't but-"

"Tommy and resume building," she said nodding understanding.

"Yeah."

"Are you happy?" she asked softly, gently, almost a whisper.

"Yeah, I feel better. I think I needed that. Some time away. Like an adventure, or a trip to the seaside, but a *different* seaside."

She smiled reaching out and tucking some of the hair behind his ears.

"So you told Daniel?"

"I did."

"And?"

"Almost a month of dating."

She smiled squeezing his arm gently.

"Congratulations honey. How long has he liked you back?"

Johnny flushed red to his ears looking down at the table, playing with the condensation around his glass.

"Almost as long as I liked him," he whispered.

She burst out laughing.

Johnny's head shot up. "Mom! It's not funny!"

"It's hilarious. Oh of course he liked you, honey. The boy flirts up a storm, but only around you." She cupped his face in her hands. "I don't know how you couldn't see it, but I'm glad you do now."

Johnny looked away and spoke softly.

"I guess I just didn't think I could be so lucky."

Her arms wrapped around him, pulling him close. Her sigh was shaky and she patted his hair.

"You *should* honey, you really should. We'll get there. And you can stay here with Mr. Miyagi and Daniel. I'll come to get you when I can. I promise. We'll start seeing more of each other. So that all this stuff doesn't build up anymore. I had to hear from *Bobby* that you went to Okinawa."

"Sorry Mom," Johnny said with a frown, hugging her, brows knit.

Come get him? Why?

Was he in trouble for going to Okinawa? His blood went cold. Did Sid get pissed? His mother didn't look hurt. But she was holding him so tight it almost hurt.

She wasn't going to tell him. She was holding herself the way she did when she gave him the Walkman. He felt almost as if it'd been out and not in his bag, if the Walkman had been within reach she might put the headphones over his ears, pressed play, and walked away to do whatever it was she was gearing herself up for. But instead, she was just hugging him close.

He felt something wet on the back of his neck.

She was crying. Something was clearly wrong.

She took a breath after a while and pushed away.

He couldn't even tell that she'd cried.

She was all smiles, no puffy eyes, no running mascara.

How'd she get so good at that? When?

"I'm just glad you're okay. And that you had fun. And got a *boyfriend*."

It didn't match. The warm teasing tone with the tears on the back of his neck.

"I also learned how to cook a few things," Johnny said.

He thought his mom would have liked Tomi Village. She would've liked the people Yukie had introduced him to who he struggled to communicate with but who gave him sweets and snacks and cups of tea. People who he understood through body language. The family that had pointed up at something and he realized they wanted him to get something they couldn't reach.

It didn't matter that they didn't understand each other. They'd still figured it out.

He thought she'd like that Yukie gave him lessons. Cooking lessons, cleaning lessons, taught him how to get mud and stains out of clothes. How to care for the traditional clothing he'd been given. Kumiko had taken pictures, said she'd send them with the others.

He'd have to show her later. Make sure she wasn't worried about *him*.

He wondered if he could cook for her sometime. Dutch said he hadn't been able to find the bitter melon. But maybe he could make the donuts. Or something else Yukie taught him.

She held his hand warmly, smiling at him. It was almost like a trick. That she'd been upset at all, but he knew.

He heard footsteps approaching and looked up when the guys came in, sitting down around the table.

"Oh, root beer floats! Thank you, Mrs. Lawrence," Tommy said.

She smiled. "Got to reward all the hard work, plus its tradition."

"Tradition?" Daniel asked sitting down on Johnny's other side.

"We have some after *every* tournament he's been in and he tells me all about it. All the details of all the fights. He had a lot to say about *you* from the last tournament," she said motioning to Daniel with her mug and a grin.

Johnny flushed. "You-I-"

He hadn't *known* then. But he had known something had been wrong. A different wrong. That he'd *done* wrong. That he was relieved Daniel won. Maybe he'd talked more about Daniel than he remembered.

She made it sound like it'd been a spark.

Maybe.

But it was embarrassing.

She laughed softly. "So I thought it'd be a good way to get him to tell me about Okinawa."

"I was unconscious for some of it. Most of the big fight."

"Then Daniel can tell me about that?" she asked with a smile.

Johnny nodded trying to organize his thoughts, wondering how much he should actually tell her. Whether or not to tell her about staying up all night at the library or how pissed he felt over Sato and Chozen's disregard to Mr. Miyagi.

It felt a little weird to tell her with Mr. Miyagi there. He realized suddenly it felt like he was just going to be gossiping with his mother, but he had an audience for the first time. Not just his mother but the guys, his boyfriend, and Mr. Miyagi.

There were things he would have told his mother easily, like how stupid Sato had been. Would have ranted to her about that for longer than he probably should have.

That just didn't seem appropriate in this setting.

Or how worried he'd been when Daniel first got kicked in the stomach. About all the terrible things he'd done and how it was suddenly like coming face to face with that in a harsh light again. How much it'd hurt to see him hurt. He might've mentioned that Daniel took care of him when his arm was hurt, but he wouldn't in front of the guys. Not in front of Daniel or Mr. Miyagi.

His mother would appreciate it. Might tease him about it, but it was too intimate to say aloud in front of a group.

He looked down at his mug trying to think of where to start. Feeling nervous all of a sudden. So much had happened in a month.

Daniel gently squeezed his arm.

He'd have to start *somewhere*, so he did, in his favorite spot, he started in the garden after graduation building the start of the guest house.

He worked his way through to Daniel breaking ice in a bar surrounded by tough military guys ready to throw down at any second, pissed because Daniel had pointed out that they weren't doing it right and then breaking all six, more than anyone had done. Falling into details about stance and how it worked, like board breaking, but how normally when he'd trained you didn't break so many like that, and how ice was thick, but how intuitively Daniel had know the right way to do it just from watching army guys do it wrong.

He talked about dancing with Kumiko, the storm, and then he got to the o-bon festival and up to the fight and he frowned turning to Daniel.

He still didn't know if he should mention what Chozen had told him. How it wasn't real but desperate. Just made to look real to everyone else, and how it probably felt real to Daniel. Would have *looked* real if he'd been conscious.

Daniel was staring at him, that look he got sometimes that Johnny couldn't place.

"The fight," Johnny said softly. "That's all you. But only if you want."

He knew that Daniel had been very upset about the fight. He wondered if he'd want to even talk about it.

Daniel blinked and nodded. He cleared his throat and began with Kumiko dancing and then Chozen coming down knocking lanterns off the wires above to appear behind Johnny.

It sounded scarier than it felt now.

His mother grabbed his hand again, tight.

If it'd happened months ago who knows what would've happened. If

Chozen would've gone for his neck *then* when anything near his neck freaked him out? He might've hurt himself trying to escape. Panicked too much.

Someone had told Chozen, because he'd apologized about it, apologized for his shoulder too. He'd looked pretty upset. Trying to figure out how to control his anger. That new feeling of anger at oneself once he'd realized he'd fucked up. Johnny knew that feeling. But Chozen was working on it. Sato and Yukie were watching him and Kumiko. She'd keep him in line.

The guys didn't look too pleased.

He hadn't told them. He'd brushed over a lot in their calls because he hadn't known how many minutes were left. Bobby hadn't said. And because they hadn't seemed as enthusiastic after the storm. Like they weren't interested anymore. He'd thought they would've been ecstatic but they never mentioned it. Never asked. So he stopped telling them everything, just checked in. Just mentioned a few things.

Daniel sounded pissed as he said what had happened at the o-bon festival.

A completely unnecessary fight to the death.

Chozen had explained he'd used a pressure point when he came to apologize.

If he knew how to do that, then, the entire time he'd been holding back in some way. That he knew he didn't have to go *that* far. That they could've been in much worse danger than a bored guy playing cat and mouse with Daniel.

Daniel made Johnny sound like a damsel in distress. That was what Chozen had been going for. But it didn't *feel* accurate.

Maybe he'd tell his mother later that Chozen hadn't actually planned to kill Daniel. That Johnny hadn't been in danger. That Chozen had apologized. Explain the intricacies of it so she wouldn't worry. Wouldn't try to crush his hand like she currently was.

Daniel fell silent at the end of the fight.

Johnny knew why he stopped.

Daniel looked pleased and a second away from talking about it. Like

he was gearing up to say it so Johnny took over quickly.

He knew he was blushing. Knew they'd know he cut Daniel off from *something*. But the guys didn't seem to want details anymore. And he didn't want to talk about that in front of Mr. Miyagi.

Even though he thought maybe it hadn't been as private as he'd thought in the moment because Yuna teased him about it later. Pointedly telling him he had a boyfriend and she was right and that they were kissing weren't they?

There was a chance a whole village knew they had kissed. Because why else would Daniel have thrown a jacket over them and leaned in like that?

It had seemed so private, so romantic, so right, their own little world, but it'd apparently been so obvious a little girl had caught on and wouldn't stop teasing him about it. Acting like she was much older than she was at times telling him with a nod that he should listen to his sensei more.

He discussed the last couple of weeks in a peaceful Okinawa before coming home. Using the business cards he'd gotten at the dance, all their adventures with Kumiko.

His mother lifted his hand in hers, and took the other one, pulling them up and between them. She looked at him sternly.

"You have to promise me you will not tell a soul the danger you were in in Okinawa. No one. This doesn't leave this room. It was a beautiful trip, full of fun and adventure and some sadness as you went with Mr. Miyagi to say goodbye to his father. No details."

"I-"

Who would he even tell? Everyone he would tell was in this room. But she was so serious.

"Promise me," she said again.

"Okay," Johnny said softly. Her brows were furrowed and she nodded letting go of his hands.

She grabbed Daniel's. He looked startled. Caught.

"You too. Don't even tell your mother."

Daniel looked like he was going to protest. But there was something intense in her look, in her grip that Johnny remembered his graduation bouquet from her.

Maybe that'd been a hint for what was happening. Whatever she was going through. He'd have to tear it apart again in his head, dissect the flowers, and go over it with his book.

He did pack his book, right? Was it in the trunk of the Avanti? Or was it in his room at the mansion?

Daniel nodded weakly and she let go of his hands.

She turned her gaze to the guys. "I don't have to tell you do I?"

"Of course not ma'am," Jimmy said.

She sighed leaning back running a hand through her hair.

"You said you got to learn how to play an instrument. Will you play something for us?"

Johnny nodded and left to go out in the garden.

He paused walking over to his bonsai. It was sitting where he usually put it when he visited.

He studied the leaves, the dirt, the branches.

The guys hadn't tried to trim it. It was growing a little wild, but he could fix that.

He smiled.

"Sorry for leaving you behind, hope you had fun with the guys. That they behaved. But we'll get to stay here for now. With Mr. Miyagi and Daniel."

He picked it up, holding it carefully in his hands, the familiar and comforting weight and he carried it to their room. The guest house.

He looked around. There weren't a lot of options. He tried to think of where there'd be good sunlight.

Maybe it should stay out in the garden.

But he wanted to keep it somewhere close. Somewhere safe. And this

was safe. The garden was safe, but this was even safer.

He set it down carefully on the desk. He'd have to ask Daniel later if that was okay. It was Daniel's desk.

He walked to the corner he'd set all of his stuff and started going through it.

The sanshin was out, that was easy.

He lifted it by the strap and slung it over onto his back.

He'd spent some of the money he'd gotten paid on souvenirs.

He found the scarf he'd picked out for his mother. Kumiko and Yukie had helped him pick it out and the snacks he'd gotten for the guys Yuna had recommended.

He put all the souvenirs in a bag and stood carefully so as not to dislodge the sanshin and turned, pausing to look at the bonsai, looking around, trying to think of another spot, a better spot.

But he couldn't. Maybe later he'd find one. He didn't want to take up too much of Daniel's desk. It was technically Daniel's room. Made and designed with him in mind.

His mother had said she was going to come get him again. Some unknown later date. This wasn't permanent. He was expected to return to the mansion.

It'd be like staying with Bobby for a couple of weeks during the summer as planned.

It'd be like the nights he slept in the Avanti or the beach. Just more comfortable. And then eventually he was expected to go back.

For what he didn't know. Maybe Sid had plans. He always talked about military school. About getting a job.

Johnny wasn't free yet. There was a month left before he turned 18.

Anything could happen.

He could run.

He didn't want to run.

He wanted to stay there, with Daniel and all of his stuff, with his bonsai and his sanshin and the giant whale shark plush and the guys and Mr. Miyagi.

He didn't want to go.

He wanted to be allowed to stay.

But maybe something bad *had* happened.

Maybe his mother was in danger, hadn't been given a choice.

Sid always boasted about his power.

About his reach.

Okinawa was starting to feel like a nice daydream.

Almost unreal. Except for the sanshin's light sturdy weight on his back.

He'd try not to take up too much space while he stayed.

Maybe it was fine.

He turned the bonsai a little on the desk, moving it so it'd get better light.

He'd have to ask Daniel if it was okay to leave it on the desk. That was all there was to it.

He wouldn't know unless he asked.

"I'll see you later, we'll find a good spot," Johnny said turning and closing the sliding door and walking quietly back to the kitchen where everyone else was.

He stopped at the door, his mother was talking.

It sounded like he'd missed part of the conversation.

Something important from her tone.

"-you understand?" she said.

"Yes Mrs. Lawrence," Daniel said his voice was quiet, soft.

"Good. Don't tell Johnny."

Shallow or deep love?

"I'm getting a divorce," Laura explained when Johnny left. "But I'm also suing Sid for abuse. The boys have told me all the things I was unaware of. Johnny's not 18 yet. He was supposed to spend the summer with Bobby where he'd be safe during the proceedings. The Browns said they'd watch him. But then Mr. Miyagi called and that seemed a better alternative as Bobby was going to also take the stand as a witness. And then all of a sudden Johnny was in Okinawa and that seemed even better. Far far away from Sid's reach because once the light was shown directly on him he's been vicious. Plenty of people have come forward to talk about how wonderful Mr. Miyagi is, how safe you boys would be with him. Pillar of the community. If Sid learns that you both got hurt while under his care-"

"You'll still win," Jimmy said gently.

"But he'd have a piece of leverage I'd rather him not have. He's been trying to undermine me, threatening to try and get custody even though he doesn't want it, even though there's only a month," she said her fingers curling into a fist. "I want him imprisoned. Gone. Let the ground just open up under him and swallow him whole. I don't want him to have a fighting chance. I want all the skeletons he hid in his closet to come and drag him to hell."

She looked pissed, furious. She then turned to Daniel again.

"Which is why I ask you to not say anything about your trip that might be negative, not until it's over. No one will ask, but if you mention it and he hears...Please don't say anything, unless point blank asked under oath, not until he's without a doubt buried under everything. So deep that he can't ever dig his way out. We have to move fast, but we're almost there."

"It's been grueling," Dutch said with a sigh.

"For you?" Jimmy asked with a laugh.

"Shut up, Mr. I'm getting college credit by helping the prosecution like some scheming monster. Just sitting in and listening to the shit has been awful. Mrs. Lawrence's spine is made of titanium. i can barely stomach it."

"Woah, you remembered the word prosecution. I'm impressed Dutch,"

Jimmy said eyes wide. "And titanium from science class."

"The goal," Tommy said. "is that Johnny doesn't have to know about it if possible."

"I don't want him in that courthouse unless it's absolutely necessary," Laura said, fingers curling into white-knuckled fists. "I don't want Sid anywhere near him. Do you understand?"

"Yes Mrs. Lawrence," Daniel said.

"Good. Don't tell Johnny."

Daniel nodded.

He watched as Laura uncurled her hands and shook them out and took a deep breath, rolling her shoulders back like she was ready for whatever was coming.

Johnny walked in with his sanshin and a bag. He set the bag down on the table handing the guys snacks and his mother a scarf. She smiled so brightly when she received it, pulling Johnny into a hug and kissing him on the cheek. He took his seat between Daniel and his mother and held the sanshin carefully in his hands.

He tuned it and played one of the songs he'd learned.

"Johnny-san getting very good," Mr. Miyagi said warmly.

Johnny smiled and Daniel felt tears prick in his eyes.

He'd forgotten about Sid. Hadn't even thought that Johnny was technically still a minor despite graduating. Not free from Sid's clutches. Why would he even threaten custody, surely it was frivolous, could be thrown out? But if he was trying to undermine Mrs. Lawrence. Hurt her for leaving him? For calling him out on his stuff and taking it to a court? Drag his name through the mud with a lawsuit, to show everyone just how awful he was rather than going away quietly?

They'd had such a wonderful last couple of weeks. He'd lived in a world without Sid or Kreese, far from their reach. He wanted to turn around, take Johnny back to Okinawa.

The amount of rot that everyone must have been digging up for the case had to be horrible. And the guys had been helping sift through it.

Daniel knew he'd only heard and seen a little bit of it and it made his blood cold.

He wanted to wrap Johnny up in a blanket, keep him safe in their room. Protect that smile that was coming around more often. And maybe here he was safe. Safe from Sid and all the other dangers that seemed to pile up.

Safe with him.

He would keep Johnny safe and he'd get stronger so that Johnny could sleep easy at night so that he could relax and those damn knots in his back wouldn't come back. Though...well...he could get rid of those and that was something he did enjoy doing, though he hadn't tried since they'd started dating.

Might be fun to try again. Might lead to other things.

The guys were talking about the national parks. They had a list they wanted to visit. They were asking Mr. Miyagi about what he wanted to do. That quiet shrug, the pain in his eyes. Daniel had tried to get Mr. Miyagi to warm up to the idea of going after his dreams, of owning a bonsai shop, but the man was stubborn, in too much pain. Daniel would think of something. For the both of them. He liked the idea of a bonsai shop. Thought Johnny might like it too. They would be so happy, if only they weren't so damn stubborn. But Johnny would be easier, he could start there. Get him in on the idea, keep him distracted. Kisses and bonsai would probably be enough for the time being. Just for a month.

Shit a month? A month till Johnny's birthday? He'd have to come up with something for that too. Something fun. Mr. Miyagi had made Daniel's 18th birthday the best one ever. Cake and a vintage car, his Ford. Johnny already had his favorite car. But they could make a nice cake. Could go on a nice date. He'd have to think of something. Figure out what Johnny would like.

As the sun began to set and turned the garden and house golden.

Jimmy got up.

"How about I make dinner?" he asked. "Is that okay Mr. Miyagi?"

"Oh, if want," Mr. Miyagi said sounding a little shocked but pleasantly so.

"Hope you don't mind but we've been here a lot. We took the leftover food from Daniel's and have been cooking a lot. Ate Johnny's cake, anything that might've spoiled in your fridge."

"I was wondering what happened to it all," Daniel said.

"Yeah, we asked your mom and she said to just eat it, so we did."

"They made me learn how to cook," Dutch complained.

"Yeah and now you won't starve," Jimmy said with a laugh.

"But we also got stuff to welcome you home."

"We argued for like a week on what you're welcome home dinner should be," Bobby said amused.

"Decided on steak," Jimmy said with a smile as he moved about the kitchen.

Daniel caught Laura's eye and she made a motion towards the garden with her head. She got up and patted Johnny's hand.

"Stay here darling," she said before walking towards the garden.

Daniel frowned but got up to follow her.

"I've got one other thing we need to talk about privately," she said to him. "I think it's safer for Johnny to be here right now. But I know you two are dating and I got to check that it is a good idea."

Daniel felt blushed bright red, heart pounding in his chest.

She knew.

Which meant Johnny had told her.

The first person he'd told when they got home was his mother.

"Y-yeah?"

"Do you actually like Johnny?" she asked. "Or do you just find him attractive?"

She sighed, hugging herself when he didn't respond, looking out at the garden.

"I made a mistake. I thought Sid loved me but he only liked how I looked, how it made *him* look to have me by his side, and he hurt Johnny because of it. Because he wanted a "pretty wife" but not a son. I can't approve if it's the same. I can't let him end up in a similar shallow relationship where he doesn't actually matter. I put up with so much shit because I thought he loved me. I thought it was better for both of us and I was so wrong. I can't let Johnny get hurt anymore. I *won't* let him get hurt anymore. So be honest upfront. Because I can't watch him get his heart broken again, not the way mine was. If it's just fun, you're both young, and I get that, but Johnny gets attached. When he lets people in he cares an awful lot even if it's only the barest kindness. Because that's *all* Kreese gave. The barest flicker of kindness and Johnny was all in from what I've learned. So, do you actually like him as a person or is this something just lust? Are you hoping for a partnership or just something physical?"

Daniel had felt awful when he'd met Ali's parents. Like everything he said and did was wrong. That there was no chance they'd ever look at him in a positive light. It'd been so easy to know things were going wrong. That they didn't like him instantly

He never knew where he was with Johnny's mother. But it was clear how much pain she was in, how much betrayal she felt. As embarrassing as the questions were. He understood it.

Daniel dug his shoe into the dirt.

"My godfathers talked to me about everything. They like to tell stories. They've been together forever. They were friends with my dad growing up. They taught me a lot about relationships. They do all this stuff for each other. Moshe hates making doctor appointments, so Tristen does it for him and they go out for McDonald's after. Neither of them like spiders but they'll go get the other and it's like when they're together they're willing to flick the spider out the nearest window. When we were home sometimes they'd come to get my parents to get the spider. I remember the door opening when I was little and they rushed in wordlessly grabbed my dad and sent him to catch the spider. They know each others favorite meals, and if they know the others had a rough day they'll cook it. They've got each other's backs. No matter what. They always took care of me when I was sick and my parents or Ma was working. They fought sometimes, but talked through it trying to understand each other and to come up with a plan. They always told me that communication is key. Repeated it all the time. That talking and making sure you understand each other, because everyone likes different things was so important.

And my parents were like that. From what Ma's told me, when Dad found out he wasn't going to...well he did everything he could to try and make things easier. Even though he was sick. She always talks about how much she hated it in the moment, as he jokingly picked out his headstone and the stuff he wanted for the funeral, but how much love there'd been in him trying to be light about it for her, trying to get it done so we wouldn't have to. Because he was scared but leaving us behind unprepared was his worst fear. I'm still finding out things he's done. Still finding notes from him and it's been ten years.

"And yeah, okay, he's, god I can't believe I'm saying this to his mother, Johnny's hot. But I want to make his favorite food. I like taking care of him. I don't want him to get sick or hurt often, but I like being there for him when he does, when he trusts me enough to let me know and to fuss. I want to go for drives with him, he's got this taco place he likes that I want to try. He read to me this book we had to read for English class and I loved that. It was actually the best way to read it. I keep picturing this apartment or something somewhere with a cozy living room with a lot of plants in it and a bunch of books and a nice kitchen with him. I like going on dates, even the ones that- you know what I think those *were* dates, I'm going to count them, I liked all of those. And I like how kids seem to like him. We were in Jersey and a kid picked him out of the crowd to ask him, a guy from California who didn't know where anything was, for help and he did.

"And in Tomi village everyone loved him. The kids talked to him, swarmed him on our walks with a bunch of questions, the older villagers greeted him. He learned the most basic phrases and it helped. We went dancing and were separated and when we found him again he had this crowd of people around him. I really want to go dancing with him. Like we didn't get to dance at prom or in Okinawa and I want to go somewhere where we can dance. Heck, I might just try and find my radio at some point. See where the guys packed it.

"He's always so surprised by people coming up to him and I think I'm starting to understand that. Where it came from. But I like that they do. I like the way he looks reading a book, how content he is, even if he's not reading it to me, even if the damn thing is from Chozen. I like how he tries his best, how he doesn't complain when Mr. Miyagi gives him stuff to do. I complain. I mean I do it, because it's Mr. Miyagi. But I reach a limit and Johnny doesn't. And I don't know if that's not a good thing, or if it's just him liking to help, or a mix. But I feel better when he's around, more at ease. Like all of the beginning of our trip to Okinawa I was worried about Mr. Miyagi and he'd just take my hand and I felt better. Or he'd do this silly little awkward pat when I'm

upset or worried and don't think anyone realized it and he does it and it's kind of silly but it helps.

"For Valentine's day he gave me lavender cookies and didn't say anything and I was so upset because I made him chocolates and then my Mom told me they were from him and there was this little heart in there and I saved it for so long. If I wasn't worried about it molding I would've kept it longer. I did eat it. Because he'd put the time and effort in. And he always does that. And I don't think he realizes people notice it," Daniel frowned, he was starting to doubt himself.

What if he liked Johnny only because he was hot? What if everything was because of that?

"Oh man, I don't know if that sounds like I actually want to be his partner or if- is this like that moral quandary? Where you get a reward for doing something good but because you know you'll get a reward then any good thing is actually selfish? It's no longer pure intentions because it's been tainted? Damn."

Daniel turned towards the garden with a sigh.

Something was wrong.

Something was different.

The bonsai.

Where was the bonsai?

He ran over to where he'd seen it when he got home.

It wasn't there.

"Have you seen the bonsai?"

"Bonsai?" she asked softly following him deeper into the garden.

"It's Johnny's bonsai. It's like, his favorite thing, or like a lifeline? He took it to school every day, Mr. Miyagi gave it to him when he apologized. And he's taken it everywhere with him that he could. I think because he was worried Sid would break it."

Daniel sunk into the grass, trying to see if it'd fallen.

"Did he have it with him when he came to sit with us again? No. He had the sanshin and his gifts, but not the bonsai. Shit, where'd it go?"

Laura stood back up and walked across the garden towards the guest house and turned on the light. Looking in and around.

"Is that it?"

Daniel got up and ran over. She was pointing a manicured nail at his desk where the bonsai sat.

"Oh thank god," Daniel said sinking down onto the wooden hallway platform.

She sat down next to him with a sigh. She brought her knee up and rested her elbow over it before lifting it up and resting her head in her palm turning to look at him. "He tends to put things safe. So a safer spot than out in the garden with all the guys around is your room. Okay, different question."

"Yeah?" Daniel asked uneasily.

"Do you love him?"

Daniel turned bright red, he turned to her eyes wide.

She was smiling.

"You're so easy to read," she said. "I shouldn't have worried. But with everything with Sid and how I hadn't noticed for so damn long. Or I just brushed off his bad qualities because I only thought he was rude to me, not violent to Johny..." She sat up and shook her head. "I had to check. But you were talking about the future the way some people talk about their dreams. Like Jimmy talks that way about being a lawyer. Or Ali used to when I'd see her about being a doctor. I've never seen one talk that way about someone they liked. Or not really. Lucille talks about your father that way sometimes. And she's so sweet, I should've realized her son would be nice too. But there's that murky history from when you met and all the people I've been dealing with, the slimy lawyers from Cobra Kai to Sid's people have been so evil that it made me forget that you're not like that. That this isn't some long con to get revenge or to get even."

Daniel turned to her horrified.

"I would never do that."

She smiled softly.

"Yeah, I can tell. You can't hide your expressions very well."

"At least *you* can tell," Daniel said with a frown. "I thought Johnny was just putting up with me out of guilt because he never noticed. Or it was a Californian thing."

She laughed. "You've been so obvious though."

"Right? Wait, so you knew? Why didn't you say anything?"

"Johnny made me pinky promise not to interfere. He's going to be so disappointed in me."

"Why?"

She sighed. "I tend to jump a couple of steps ahead. I mean I just asked you point-blank like or lust and then went straight to love. If I'm not careful I'm going to start asking you what cake flavors you think you'd like for your wedding."

"A light caramel cake with a bit of coconut in the in-between layers mixed in with the icing."

She turned back to him eyes wide and he felt his skin burn bright red.

"I-I do it too," he whispered.

He hadn't mentioned that to anyone out loud.

Laura laughed, it was bright and cheerful, before taking one of Daniel's hands in hers.

"Well, we're just going to have to go out for tea or something from time to time. Brunch maybe? Lunch? We'll figure it out. Get to know each other better because it sounds like you're planning to stick around for as long as possible. Your mom knows right?"

"Yeah."

"I thought so, she kept asking about Johnny. I think she was fishing for information for you, but Johnny requested I not interfere. It was incredibly frustrating. But I was good. So I didn't really answer her questions. We got wine drunk at a fancy restaurant and she flat out asked me if I thought Johnny liked boys. I laughed and told her he's always hanging out with the guys so I doubted he hated them. She got so frustrated but didn't know how to clarify. I played dumb. I'll have to call Lucille and apologize and explain. Anyway, after the lawsuit,

we'll go out for tea okay?"

"I'd like that," Daniel said.

"Oh and if he asks what's up because he's a smart boy and is probably realizing *something* is happening and that you know, you can tell him that we talked about his relationship with you and I was embarrassing, but the other thing, *that* I'll tell him when I'm ready and that I want him to hear it from me," she said giving his hand a gentle squeeze.

"Okay," Daniel said.

She turned to look into the room behind them.

"Living together is a big step. Living with Mr. Miyagi's going to be a big step for both of you. You won't have privacy. To, you know- take care of yourself."

Daniel turned bright red but she just smiled.

"But I hope it goes well. It'll be nice for Johnny. But make sure he knows he can take up space. I've realized he's been damaging himself trying to make himself as small as possible, which for an over 6ft boy made of muscle isn't good for him. And it's going to be hard in this small space."

Daniel nodded looking at the room. It wasn't even all of his stuff, and he knew Johnny hadn't emptied out the trunk. He didn't know where all of Johnny's things were.

She leaned forward, hands on either side of his face, and kissed the top of his head.

"I'm sure your Mom wishes she was here. But on her behalf, welcome home Daniel."

Daniel felt tears prick at his eyes.

She pulled him into a hug.

"It sounds like you went through a lot in Okinawa and you were very brave. I'm sure she was very worried and *is* very proud of you. And thank you for taking care of Johnny for me. Keeping an eye out for him all the time. You did good."

It wasn't his mother, but it was similar.

The words he'd hoped to hear from his own mother, the warm embraced he'd hoped for.

The happiness to see him home in one piece instead of an empty apartment and her across the country without him.

He'd wanted to come home to stability, not the ever-shifting earth beneath his feet. He wanted it to sit still for once. For the universe to let him stay where he liked. To let him have options. To have come home and for things to be the same as when he'd left it.

This wasn't the same, but it was close enough, and he'd take it.

He hugged her back.

It was like she'd taken one look at him and known, known what he needed to hear in that motherly way he thought only *his* mother knew.

After a while, the smell of steak filled the garden.

"Dinner!" Jimmy called and they walked back.

Bobby was talking to Johnny about his siblings. Tell him what they'd been doing all summer. Dutch looked bored head in his hand and his elbow on the table and Tommy was talking quietly to Mr. Miyagi.

Johnny glanced up when he came in and gave him a small questioning smile.

This was home.

He'd told Kumiko that home was where you hang your hat when trying to get her to think about coming back with them. Determined they could find a dance studio for her. He'd meant it for her, hadn't thought about it for himself.

He thought home was where is parents were, then where his mother was and now it was just him.

But it *wasn't* just him.

It was all these people who were there to welcome them home.

They'd moved for him while his mother and he were gone.

The awkwardness of it was unmentioned, they did say a thing, acting

like it wasn't a problem.

They'd been ready to come to help, even though they were busy.

They'd given up their last summers to help Johnny's mother, to help *his* mother.

Daniel didn't think he'd ever had friends like them.

The closest he could think of was his godfathers.

Close enough friends that they become family.

People who show up, not just when things are good but are there when things are bad.

It'd be okay. Everything would be fine because they'd take it on together.

The quiet of night

Dinner with the guys was nice. Johnny had missed them and all the energy they brought around. It was different from Okinawa, easy.

Dutch was glaring at him though. Sitting across the table and kicking him occasionally. Like he was pissed about something.

After dinner and cake and talking about their trip a little more, about the summer that the guys had had, about Jimmy's new crush, Dutch starting Taekwondo, and moving all of Daniel's stuff and hanging out around Mr. Miyagi's his mother said it was time for her to go.

She'd stayed later than Johnny expected.

He kept waiting for her to have her Cinderella hour, the time she'd have to leave before it turned into an argument with Sid.

He was pleased she stayed so long.

Touched.

But he worried. Worried the fight she'd get into on his behalf.

He walked her out. She stopped at her car and dug around in her purse pulling out a business card. Her face suddenly serious.

"Could you do something for me, no questions?"

Johnny took the card with a frown.

"There's a person here," she said tapping the card. "Could you go here, sometime during the week, it'll take a while, but just talk to them. Anything, everything, except Okinawa. It's not going to be pleasant, but it'll be good and it'll help a lot."

Johnny stared at the card wracking his brain trying to think of what *him* talking about anything could possibly help anyone with anything. But he could for his mother. There was just an address and phone number, no information about the place or what it was.

"Okay," he said.

"Sometime soon, please."

"Okay."

She smiled hugging him close. "Welcome home again Johnny."

"Thanks, Mom."

"I love you, you know that right?"

"I do."

"Good," she said, brushing hair from his forehead and kissing his forehead warmly.

"I'll talk to you soon I hope. Have fun, okay? Enjoy your summer and being home."

"I will."

She got in her car and looked up at him. Her eyes were glassy but she smiled brightly at him so he wasn't sure if it was the lighting that made it look like she was about to cry or not.

"Get home safe," he said. "I love you."

"Good night Johnny."

He stepped back as she started her car and drove off.

It felt like the first day of kindergarten. She had cried then. Kneeling in front of him before work, dropping him off. Watching her drive off leaving him behind for the first time. Like the bubble of their time together was over. Like everything was changing.

It wasn't like he hadn't been left behind before. He'd seen her off before many times. Held her jacket for her before she'd gone to fancy dinners or parties, waved her off at the airport.

But she hadn't *cried*. She'd been excited, she'd been a little bored, she'd been amused.

He stood a little longer than he should have, peering into the darkness beyond the light of Mr. Miyagi's home. Long after the sound of her car was gone. Past when he couldn't see the lights of it in the distance anymore.

Something knocked his legs out from under him and he found himself in the dirt looking up.

Dutch was standing over him with his hands shoved in his pockets face sour but eyes shocked that he'd gotten away with it. Like he hadn't expected that he could sneak up on Johnny. Hadn't thought he'd actually fall. But Dutch looked too pissed to look sorry about it or feel bad. He crouched down next to Johnny.

"You forgetting to tell us anything?" Dutch said.

"Well, clearly it wasn't that I missed you," Johnny grumbled pushing himself up in the dirt. "Cause that flew out the window like a minute ago."

"You look pretty damn cozy moving in with Daniel. Not a nervous wreck like you would've been *before* Okinawa. Sure you didn't go to Okinawa to elope and not tell us? Because if so I'm fucking pissed and I've got some letters to go write."

Write letters to who?

Johnny frowned.

"There you are," Bobby said. "Wait what happened?"

"Bastard left his guard down. So he fell like a sack of bricks."

"Dutch," Bobby said, tone tired.

"*Bobby,*" Dutch mimicked the same tone.

"We'll deal with it later," Bobby said.

Dutch glared at him.

Bobby held his gaze steadily.

Then after a while, Dutch sighed standing up. He kicked at the dirt and walked back into the house.

Bobby held out his hand to Johnny.

"Never thought I'd see the day where Dutch got the better of you," he said with a soft laugh.

"Yeah," Johnny said taking his hand and getting up, dusting the dirt off of himself.

"You okay?" Bobby asked wrapping an arm around Johnny's shoulder

as they turned towards the house.

He wondered if this was what Bobby had mentioned. Once when they were out, some late-night conversation about the first time he'd gone to a sleepover and that cold night of his parents not being there, that he noticed in a quiet moment that made him sneak away from the fun to call his parents and ask them to come to get him.

It was weird to think of, homesick Bobby Brown as a kid who went to sleepovers.

Maybe it was like the late nights his mom worked, sitting in their apartment waiting for her to come home. The few times where she didn't get home until morning and would find him sleeping on the couch and he'd wake up to her carry him to bed.

It was a similar feeling, but without the morning.

"Yeah," Johnny said, quietly as they walked back into Mr. Miyagi's house.

Mr. Miyagi was had his hand on the door to his room.

"Long flight. See boys tomorrow," he said bowing his head slightly to them before going into his room.

"We got permission to spend the night," Bobby said squeezing his arm.

Where were they going to sleep? He supposed he still had the tent in the trunk of the Avanti.

Jimmy was in the kitchen talking to Daniel and Tommy, Tommy finishing the dishes.

Dutch was looking in the fridge and pulling out some beers.

"I'm going to call my Mom. My uncle kind of cut her off earlier, he should be asleep now," Daniel said kissing Johnny on the cheek and heading off down the hall to the phone.

Dutch stood holding a couple of beers and stared at Johnny, eyes wide.

Johnny stared back with a frown.

Dutch set the beer bottles down with a heavy thud, angrily removing

the caps.

"What. the. fucking. hell?" Dutch said.

"Why are you so pissed?" Johnny asked stepping forward. "What did I do to piss you off?"

"You haven't said jack shit about you and Daniel."

"I did too."

"When? Because I've never listened so hard in my fucking life, for some scrap of explanation," Dutch said stepping forward and meeting him.

It was the kind of charge of a fight half a second from breaking out. From punches and kicks to be thrown. Dutch was fucking pissed. And Johnny was too tired to deal with it. Too drained.

"I called home and told Bobby. You all kept telling each other everything, and no one said anything. I figured you didn't want to hear anything about it anymore."

Dutch whirled on Bobby.

Bobby was frowning taking one of the beers.

"I would've remembered if you told me Johnny."

"It was the first call I did after the storm. Tommy talked to Kumiko and then the next call I told you."

"*Fuck*. That's the night the call kept dropping out. I missed like half of the conversation because it cut out. I thought you were in a good mood and chatty for someone who'd dislocated his shoulder and survived a big storm," Bobby said sinking down with his beer to the floor. "But Kumiko had told Tommy that Mr. Miyagi gave you a ton of medicine, so I figured it was just that. Not that you'd been talking about Daniel and *I missed it*."

"Well that explains things," Johnny said sinking down to the floor as well.

"So you seriously thought we went from being invested to just not every speaking of it?" Tommy asked softly crouching down.

"Yeah," Johnny said with a shrug.

Dutch and Jimmy joined them on the floor.

"Okay, less pissed now," Dutch said with a sigh.

"Wait so if you didn't hear my call then, why have you been pissy all night?"

"Daniel told us," Jimmy said with a soft laugh. "He looked like he panicked after he said it. Like he hadn't meant to."

"Definitely got the argument happening to stop, which was my request," Bobby said with a smile.

"Can't believe you been dating for a *month* and we got screwed over by international calling," Dutch said. "I'm going to complain."

"You *are* complaining," Jimmy said.

"To someone who can do something about it," Dutch said rolling his eyes. "You guys can't do jack shit."

"Such a vote of confidence. And here I thought we were doing pretty well at getting stuff done," Bobby said with a laugh and reached out patted Johnny's shoulder. "Sorry I should've mentioned the call dropped and I missed everything you said."

"Way to drop the ball *Bobby*," Jimmy said.

"Hey, I'm sorry okay?" Bobby said.

"So are you happy?" Tommy asked gently.

"You didn't get replaced already by that gigantic fish you brought home?" Dutch asked with a smile quirking on his lips.

"I have not," Johnny said. "We got that at the aquarium."

"You didn't win it at a fair?" Dutch teased.

"Nope. We modeled for their ads."

"We? So Daniel's in some ads in Okinawa now?" Jimmy asked. "Going to have to find those."

"And Kumiko," Johnny said.

"Damn, Tommy, your aunt works in magazines, see if she can find us

these ads," Dutch said.

"Oh, they were going to reach out to the magazines to put the clothing ads in there too."

"Did you just work the whole time?" Bobby asked with a laugh.

"I learned sanshin, and tea ceremony, and cooking, and-"

"I thought Jimmy was fucking awful with spending his summer learning," Dutch complained. "Get to the good shit."

"Fine, Dutch, what do you want me to say? Didn't I already go over all this?"

"Yeah, and you skipped the good shit. Daniel told us the damn fight. Which by the way Chozen better not show his face around here," Dutch said.

"He went about it wrong, but he kept his promises," Johnny said.

"Promises? Daniel didn't mention promises," Dutch said leaning forward.

"It's complicated."

"Hey you're stuck with us for the night, so go you might as well tell us," Jimmy said sipping at his beer.

Johnny sighed. He told them about all his run-ins with Chozen all the way up to the fight.

"Shit he knew pressure points?" Tommy whispered.

Johnny nodded with a frown, told them that Daniel had done the little honk thing that Mr. Miyagi had done to Kreese and how Sato and Chozen had reunited. Johnny heard Daniel making his way back towards them.

"Please tell me you are not talking about *Chozen*," Daniel said behind him.

Johnny looked back and up at him and Daniel sunk down to the floor with arms wrapping around Johnny.

"He's trying to be better. I know what that's like," Johnny said softly.

Daniel looked at him and shook his head. "Can that be the one thing we leave behind in Okinawa? Can we just leave Chozen there?" he complained. He looked around taking in the beers.

Johnny held out the one he'd been given but hadn't taken a sip of yet. Wasn't sure if Daniel was even interested. But Daniel took it and took a sip.

"Huh, this is better," Daniel said thoughtfully passing it back.

"Then what?"

"The stuff at the party. I was starting to think I just didn't like beer."

"That had been sitting out for who knows how long."

Daniel laughed. "True."

"How's your Mom?"

"Better, so what's happening here?"

"We learned that technically Johnny told us first," Bobby said.

"Told you first?"

"That you two are dating," Tommy said.

"But the call cut out for the actual admission," Dutch complained.

Daniel grinned at Johnny. "So when was that?"

"Second or third day after the storm," Johnny said thoughtfully.

"I can't believe they all knew," Daniel said with a sigh, shaking his head.

"Since the beginning," Jimmy said with a grin.

Johnny leaned against Daniel. That quiet night melancholy fading, taking his hand in his. Daniel gave his hand a gentle squeeze. They were too excited he realized, talking about all the plans they'd had. It turned into a weird game of was Daniel flirting in that moment or not? And almost every single time Daniel said yes. It was embarrassing to realize how much he missed.

They finished their beers, cleaned up, and headed off to the guest

house. The day was wearing heavily on Johnny. Even though it'd been another day where he'd left Okinawa, the travel, the transfer in Tokyo, it all added up and was exhausting.

He wanted to shower and sleep.

So he grabbed his stuff and left.

They'd figure out sleeping arrangements without him. They knew his stuff was in the trunk. If they were camping. But from the way they settled into the guest room it was starting to look like Daniel would be subjected to a busy room.

Showering after a long flight and a long day was nice. Even in Mr. Miyagi's tiny shower. He wondered what Mr. Miyagi would do now.

Daniel had mentioned at dinner that Mr. Miyagi had a dream of opening a bonsai shop. Mr. Miyagi had stressed it had been a *retirement* dream, but Daniel had that look on his face. An argument already that he wasn't going to give up on. He'd win. Johnny just didn't know what.

Like the guys Daniel liked to scheme. Maybe leaving them all alone together again was a bad idea. Who knew what they'd scheme up?

He was relieved they were keeping busy.

Jimmy had said he was working on some cases as some school program. Had mentioned he was shadowing some guy to court cases and helping. Johnny tried to remember the name of some DA he was trying to meet with. Cole. He wouldn't go into details but he talked about how invigorating it was to be in court and working. Getting to see the day-to-day of the rest of his life. That dream of his. It was that and Jennifer.

And Dutch seemed to be enjoying taekwondo. It was keeping him busy and out of trouble, he'd said.

He looked like he wanted to spar. Johnny *was* curious to see the different moves.

It sounded like they'd had a busy, boring, and good summer.

He knew they'd had fun things planned. They'd wanted to go to all the parks over the summer. Thought Daniel would like it and knew Johnny would. And Johnny...before Okinawa had wanted to go to

scope it out.

It was on his list of places to run away to.

To go into the forests and not come out again. He'd become a ranger and just watch for fires.

He got out of the shower, dressed, and walked back to the room. It was a nice room. The guys had done a good job finishing it up.

They were sitting on the floor in a little circle like some nightmarish spin the bottle game was about to happen.

But he knew they automatically fell into circles, to see each other evenly as possible. It was just a natural way that they moved.

Johnny walked over to his bonsai and picked it up again, he was starting to doubt that a room with a total of six boys in it was a safe spot for his bonsai for the night.

"It will be fine there," Bobby said.

"Just as it's been fine the whole time you were gone," Dutch said.

"We took good care of it," Tommy said.

They were all looking at him. Was it that obvious?

"You can leave it there if you want, it's okay," Daniel said. "It looks nice."

Johnny nodded and set it back down. He adjusted it slightly and then turned back.

"Daniel was explaining more of the bonsai shop," Jimmy said as they scooted to give him room to sit in their circle.

"And they were explaining the process of opening a business in LA," Daniel said looking at him as he sat down. "I've even got a name for it I think, if he likes it, because *we* know what a bonsai is right? But no one else does, but they are little trees, so I was thinking *Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees,*" Daniel said holding his hand out and punctuating each of the words in the air in front of him.

Johnny nodded. "It's clear."

Daniel grinned, delighted by this approval of the name he'd come up

with.

"The problem is," Dutch said amused. "Daniel wants to use his college fund for it."

Daniel frowned, practically a pout. "I don't know what I even want to do, why should I waste my time and money trying to figure it out when I can help Mr. Miyagi? It'd be of more use then."

"It seems kind of like a waste," Jimmy said shaking his head. "You'd deplete almost all of your funds. Who does something like that?"

"Hey, Johnny did it."

"Hey," Johnny said.

"Well, you did! You have practically no money left right? Just what you were paid in Japan. And you spent some of that on souvenirs," Daniel said.

"Wait, you have no money?" Jimmy asked eyes wide.

"I spent the last of it on the flights," Johnny said with a shrug. "I have enough for the time being from modeling, it'll be fine."

"You two are going to be hopeless," Tommy said.

"I suppose you could look at shop locations," Bobby said. "See what's out there in your budget."

"Bobby!" Jimmy and Tommy said turning to him.

Bobby shrugged. "Hey my parents opened a small bakery with all the money they'd saved up and it turned out okay."

"Not everyone is that lucky," Jimmy said. "Do you know how much work goes into a small business?"

"No, but I have a feeling you're going to tell me," Bobby said with a sigh.

Daniel took Johnny's hand, interlacing their fingers and twisting his hand slightly so his thumb could slip between their palms, dragging his thumb against Johnny's palm.

It was nice to be home. Nice to be with the guys, with Daniel.

He was glad he'd gotten to see his mother, even if he was worried about her. She'd tell him not to worry. Remind him she knew how to take care of herself. She'd been self-reliant *before* Sid. Checking out books from the library to fix things in their apartments herself. Fixing the car on her own. She always told him not to worry about her. She was the mom. But he still worried. Still wanted her to be happy. For things to be easier for her.

He wanted that for a lot of people. For Mr. Miyagi, for Daniel. Nothing was ever easy.

Tacos by the beach

Daniel woke up to the sound of birds. He hadn't set an alarm. The thought of waking up to birds was nice. The reality of it was that he hated the birds with every fiber of his being in that moment.

He buried his face in Johnny's back wanting to avoid the sunlight that was streaming in. He muttered quietly about stupid birds and some people should be allowed to sleep in every once in a while. A guy has to fight an idiot to the death while being overseas you'd think when he got home he'd get to sleep in. That he'd earned it. He was home. Sort of.

He wanted to enjoy it. He wanted to enjoy having Johnny in his bed. Because it was *his* bed. The bed from the apartment and it at least smelled like home.

While the room was different Johnny Lawrence was in his bed. But he also came with four ex-cobras who'd fallen asleep on the floor in sleeping bags they had with them.

Dutch had suggested the night before they rock paper scissors for the bed but it got nixed unanimously much to Dutch's complaint that he was tired of sleeping on floors.

It was kind of strange. To have them all there. But it reminded him of holidays back home, where when the whole family met up the kids and anyone unmarried and under thirty had to sleep on the floor. This was more manageable than that. Quieter.

He tightened his arms around Johnny. He was definitely awake now. His brain was up and thinking and it wasn't shutting up. He didn't want to get up though. It was comfortable in his bed.

Johnny had looked confused before bed. Like he was unsure where he was going to sleep. Like he expected the whale shark to take his place or something silly like that. Daniel had to get out of bed and drag him over.

*You're sleeping in my bed. It's **our** room, this is where you sleep. Like always.*

Johnny had turned bright red.

The guys were there. They probably hadn't known they shared a bed on the floor for the past month. It wasn't like Johnny wasn't used to sharing a bed. They knew that.

He'd come to bed, taking his spot next to Daniel. Maybe it was embarrassing with the guys there. But they were the ones who started it. They were the ones who faked the room shortage at the lodge.

Daniel preferred to sleep next to Johnny instead of anywhere else. He'd gotten used to sleeping on the floor. But this was better.

It was their fault so why should Daniel be embarrassed? *They started it.*

Maybe it was because they'd built the room that they felt owed some space? Well, Daniel and Johnny had started that.

They'd also moved Daniel's stuff out of the apartment. That...that he didn't have an excuse for. They won that one. Deserved a treat. What did people usually do? Pizza and beer? Maybe he'd cook them dinner some night. That could be fun.

He wondered what time it was. He didn't know where any clocks were.

He pushed himself up and looked around, the guys were still sleeping. Sometimes Johnny had a watch. He didn't wear it to bed, usually took it off before bed. But he also showered before bed. So who knew where it went.

He looked around and spotted it sitting on a little side table from Daniel's room. He leaned over Johnny and reached for the watch. Johnny moved, rolling away, escaping since Daniel had let go.

Daniel nearly grabbed for him, a momentary fear that Johnny having spent so much time sleeping on the floor would just roll right off. But he just rolled onto his back.

Daniel grabbed the watch and checked the time. Ten am. Was that late? It felt late. But it was also summer. Sleeping in in the summer was like 2pm.

He'd gotten 8 hours. But after such a long flight, maybe Johnny would need more. He carefully put the watch back and glanced down.

Johnny was awake looking up at him.

Daniel leaned down and kissed him.

He couldn't help himself.

He wanted a kiss and went for it.

Plus sleepy Johnny had been kind of fun once they started dating, once he knew Johnny was awake in the mornings when the alarm went off.

Johnny reached up and wrapped an arm around Daniel's shoulders, holding him close, kissing him back.

"You know, up until this point I thought they were suspiciously the same as always," Bobby said.

Daniel blinked. He didn't think they would've woken up.

They were being quiet.

Johnny had frozen beneath him, ears pink.

Maybe not quiet enough.

"Yeah, they always held hands," Dutch said.

"But whatever this is, is clearly new. Do we need to leave guys?" Jimmy asked.

"Think they forgot we were here?" Tommy asked.

"Kinda hurts my feelings if so," Dutch said with a sigh. "But otherwise..."

Daniel got up with a sigh.

Johnny probably had forgotten. It seemed to take him a while in the mornings to get his bearings. A few minutes to take stock. But he melted into morning kisses.

He liked those moments. And it'd taken so damn long to work their way there. They'd have to save up and get a place with a guest room or a living room and kick the guys there.

Oh god, was there a chance that they'd be like thirty and he'd wake up to an ex-cobra in his bed or on the floor of his bedroom?

They'd have to have a nice guest room. Lure them there with a bed to themselves.

Maybe it'd be fine. Every once in a while. Like an occasional sleepover. It'd just have to be a bigger bed.

He'd have to just accept it huh?

Date Johnny Lawrence and you get four more friends who will sleep in your bed. Or floor.

Ali had said it was like they were guards.

Maybe it was because of Sid.

Dutch had mentioned how Johnny hadn't had sleepovers growing up. Maybe they were making up for lost time for him. Trying to cram in all the fun they got to experience and share it.

He couldn't be miffed about that. They were going to have to compromise.

They'd have to put up with the sweet morning kisses Daniel liked and he'd just accept that they might end up also in his bed someday, platonically.

Just hopefully not all the time.

"Good morning," Daniel said, shifting and turning towards them.

"Oh, shit, is Daniel pissed off?" Dutch asked. "I don't think I've seen that face in forever."

"It does feel like a parent who's about to scold you. It's that kind of look huh? I thought only Bobby had that expression," Jimmy said with a laugh.

"Well, we did ruin whatever was happening," Tommy said.

"Yeah, so? Rule #1 of common courtesy. Don't bone with other people in the room, who aren't part of it," Dutch said.

"You know I haven't heard that rule, but that's a good rule Dutch," Jimmy said.

"Thanks."

"We weren't going to-" Daniel heaved out a big sigh.

Did he even bother to explain? Was it even something he should do? He did want to, but definitely not with the guys on the damn floor. He had some restraint.

"You're all awful. It's too early for this," Daniel decided on getting up, grabbing his stuff to go shower and hopefully come up with something better. That sounded less indignant.

They'd been drunk, he didn't know how they were functioning.

He remembered how awful he'd felt after the party. And he felt bad after such a long flight and passing out. Showering felt better. Woke him up more.

He liked the guys. But he really wanted time alone with Johnny and it was like the universe didn't want that to happen. There were always other people around. He wouldn't even get a chance to try anything because there were always people.

They got all this alone time when they hadn't known, but now that they did know it was like the universe didn't trust him.

Maybe he couldn't be trusted.

Daniel sighed washing his face.

They were his friends. He shouldn't be mad at them. They were all excited that they were home. And it was nice to have that welcome home. Especially since he'd lost his home and his mother was across the country. It would've been so lonely if it'd been just Mr. Miyagi and him. It was nice to have people excited to see him, even if they started teasing way too early in the morning.

When he finished getting ready they were all in the kitchen making breakfast.

Eggs and bacon and toast.

Dutch was cooking. He looked bitter about it.

Daniel sat down next to Johnny.

Bobby was holding a little sheet of paper in his hands.

Dutch filled the plates and brought them out to the table.

Bobby shifted the sheet in his hand and pulled off a sticker and stuck it to Dutch's shirt.

"Good job not complaining about cooking."

Dutch frowned but didn't say anything. He plucked at his shirt looking down at the sticker and the frown faltered. It looked like he was struggling to seem like he was still put upon.

Daniel wanted to laugh but everyone was so serious. So he ate to stop himself from saying anything.

"Mr. Miyagi left a note," Tommy said passing it over to Daniel.

Gone fishing.

Daniel sighed turning to Johnny. "You want to look at shops with me, to get an idea?"

He caught Bobby putting another sticker on Dutch's shirt.

"No shells, it's good. Good job."

Dutch looked pleased. So this was how they were getting him to cook.

"Sure. I do need to go somewhere today."

"Yeah? Where?" Daniel asked.

Johnny pulled a business card out of his pocket. He felt the guy's eyes on them, on the card. There was nothing to explain what it was. An address.

"Hmmm, that's mysterious. Want me to drop you off and pick you up?" Daniel asked. "We could sign up for a tour of some places, get the ball rolling, and then I can drop you off."

Daniel knew Johnny liked having his Avanti so he could go where he wanted. But Daniel wanted to drive, wanted to spend time with Johnny, wanted to remind him he could be reliable.

"I don't know how long it'll be. It might be long," Johnny said softly.

"That's fine. There might be a cafe or something," Daniel said. "I can chill there and wait. It'll be nice. I'll have time to go over any paperwork they give me."

The more he thought about it the more he liked the idea. They'd kind of have some alone time. He could tell Johnny more about his plan. Get his input on it. Because he liked it the more he thought about it. He liked the thought of picking him up. He'd had fun the last time he'd done it. Maybe now Johnny would notice everything.

"Okay, thank you," Johnny said.

Daniel grinned. "My pleasure."

"I regret everything," Dutch mumbled. "We're going to have to watch this sickly sweet nonsense all the time now."

"Don't make me take back one of your stickers," Bobby said.

Dutch quickly covered his hand over his shirt where the stickers were and turned away. "Don't you dare. I wasn't being serious."

"Breakfast is good, thank you for making it Dutch," Johnny said.

Dutch turned his head back towards Johnny and beamed so bright Daniel thought he'd go blind.

Then he shrugged like it was no big deal.

"Turns out eggs are easy, you gotta whisk 'em, cook 'em slow and add cream. I like adding cheese, onion, and garlic too."

"It's real nice," Johnny said.

Bobby sighed taking a sticker from the sheet and sticking it on Dutch's forehead. Dutch grinned pleased before turning his focus on eating his breakfast.

Daniel had missed the Ford. He'd driven it from South Seas the day before with Mr. Miyagi. But that had been stressful. He'd lost his home after coming home from a trip.

But now he'd get to drive Johnny somewhere. Remind him that not all LaRusso's were bad drivers. That he was safe in the Ford and with Daniel. Plus he was excited to see the steps to starting Mr. Miyagi's business. What he could pull off. Make a dream come true.

Mr. Miyagi needed some good in his life and if it was within Daniel's power to make it happen he was going to do it.

As they left Mr. Miyagi's place Daniel told Johnny all about his plans, his vision. All the things he wanted to try to accomplish. How this was so much better than going off to college.

He felt relaxed, driving at ease. He reached over and placed his hand on Johnny's thigh. He hadn't gotten to do that in a while. Johnny usually took his hand and he liked to hold his hand, but he wanted to see if there was a reaction to this now that Johnny knew. Now that they were together.

Johnny's hand went over his.

Cute. Not what he was going for, but it was fine.

He parked the car in front of the realtor's shop surprised that no one else was parked on the street.

It was LA, parking was always a nightmare.

"Must be a sign," Daniel said hopping out of the Ford and heading towards the building. "Got free parking immediately."

Johnny smiled following him in.

They managed to get a meeting with a realtor, where Daniel explained his business plan, or well...Mr. Miyagi's business plan. The realtor listened with a small smile and nod. When Daniel stopped talking she handed him a large stack of paper.

"You boys seem young and it's exciting to start something new. But I've got a son your age, so I want you to read through all of this and maybe talk to someone with more experience reading documents and about zoning laws and lease agreements, there's a sample on in there to familiarize yourself with terminology. And then come back and if you still think it's for you then I'll show you some places. Give it a week okay? I don't want to see you until-" She looked at her calendar. "Next Friday. Can you come back this time next Friday? There's a lot of stuff you need to think about if you want to succeed. And because you want to sell these...what were they again, little trees? You got to make sure you've got enough lighting, right? Natural lighting and space. So do this, think about what you want in a shop, people usually make a wishlist, and then come back okay?"

Daniel took the thick packet of documents. "Thank you."

"Of course! Here's my business card, let me know if you have

questions. But I recommend someone you trust to help you go over it."

It would be enough to read for however long Johnny would be...wherever it was he needed to go. So he stuck it under his arm and they returned to the Ford. He dumped it onto the seat between them and followed Johnny's directions to the place on the business card.

There was thankfully a cafe across the street.

No one was around so Daniel leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"I'll be in there," he said pointing to the cafe. "Got plenty to go through so take as long as you need."

"Thank you," Johnny said turning to him.

Daniel nodded kissing him again quickly before grabbing his keys, a packet of paper, and heading towards the cafe. Johnny walked off towards the building he was supposed to go to with the card in his hands.

Daniel ordered a latte and took a seat near the door and window and spread out his paperwork to read through it.

It was...dry. It was boring and dull. But it was Mr. Miyagi's dream. And he could ask Jimmy and the guys to help him look it all over. Have them help look over the lease. But he wanted to have some idea. Because it was *his* idea. And he'd be the one helping Mr. Miyagi. *Wanted* to be the one to help him.

After a while, he caught movement across the way and looked up to see Johnny. It was later in the day, afternoon. He glanced at his watch. Johnny had been in there several hours and Daniel had been reading about lease agreements and commercial zoning.

Daniel hopped up gathering all of his things, his long-ago finished coffee, and hurried out to meet him.

"Was it okay?"

Johnny looked withdrawn. Thoughtful.

Daniel moved closer, moving into Johnny's space.

"Can we-"

"Yes. Anything," Daniel said quickly.

Johnny smiled softly, it wasn't very big. He looked tired.

"-go to the beach?" he asked.

"I can make that happen," Daniel said with a grin.

He spun on his heels hopping into the Ford.

He wondered if Johnny wanted to take a nap.

Would they have to get an apartment within walking distance of the beach? That'd be expensive. He'd have to save up. But it'd be nice.

Except during hurricanes, or storms, or if it was in a flood zone. Maybe Tommy could tell him the dangers of owning a beach house.

He held out his hand out to Johnny while he drove, Johnny took it, holding on a little tighter.

He was quiet, looking at the window at the palm trees they passed.

Daniel found a parking lot wondering if Johnny wanted to sit, go for a swim, a walk. He wasn't sure. Would Johnny just run straight into the water? It was the middle of the afternoon but he wondered if he could talk Johnny into going skinny dipping. That would be fun. If only there weren't people around.

Johnny got out and was stretching. Was he going to go for a run?

Daniel followed him down into the sand.

Johnny took off his shoes and socks and rolled his pant legs up and walked into the water, not deep, but just standing at where the water crashed around his ankles.

Daniel stood next to him, looking out at the water.

He should put a blanket in the ford. Some towels. With how much Johnny liked the beach, maybe instead of having a picnic they could do something else on the beach. Not here though, too many people, but if he could find a secluded beach, after skinny dipping it'd be fairly easy to get warmed up again together.

Pay attention, Daniel.

Daniel looked at Johnny.

"Was it bad?" he asked

Johnny ran a hand through his hair with a sigh.

"Just a lot of talking. They want me to come back tomorrow and talk more. I'm tired of talking."

Daniel nodded hooking his arm through Johnny's.

"Want me to bring you tomorrow? I still have plenty of stuff to read. It's all legal jargon. And all sorts of city policies and guidelines."

Johnny nodded.

Daniel wasn't sure whether he should just stand there next to Johnny or talk. He tried not talking. But his brain kept thinking of which kind of blanket was the most comfortable and how maybe he should also make sure to bring sunblock unless it was at night.

But what if it got too cold?

It was safer to talk about the boring stuff he read. So he told Johnny about all the boring stuff he'd read. Trying to make it as interesting as possible, but it was mostly complaining.

After a while, when Daniel thought his legs were getting tired Johnny shifted and Daniel let the words on his lips die.

"I know my mom doesn't want me to know what's happening," Johnny said softly. "She likes to handle things by herself. But she gave me a graduation bouquet and I've been going over it in my head, there were four parts that were weird. Patience in adversity, powerful against evil, courage, and a declaration of war," Johnny rolled his shoulders back in a motion so similar to his mother. Like he was preparing for something awful. "I know she's asked you not to tell me. That's fine. But can you answer one question for me?"

"I'll try," Daniel said softly.

"Is she sick?" Johnny asked voice barely a whisper. "Is...is she dying?"

Daniel grabbed Johnny's arm and spun him so they were facing one another and looked him in the eyes.

"That's two questions and no to both of them. She's-she's just working

on a big project. Okay? Several projects it sounds like. Because she's a strong busy lady. She wants to tell you about it herself when the time is right."

Johnny nodded looking up and away blinking and palming at his eyes, letting out a deep breath. Daniel wrapped his arms around Johnny holding him close.

"Everything is fine. What she's doing isn't easy. But she's healthy. It's nothing for you to worry about okay?"

Johnny's arms wrapped around him and Daniel felt Johnny curl around him.

"Just give her some time okay?"

He felt Johnny nod. He rubbed Johnny's back.

"We're not by chance anywhere near that favorite taco shop are we?" Daniel asked.

Daniel felt a puff of warm air, an amused sound followed by a soft, "Yeah."

He didn't let go until Johnny did. And it wasn't for a while, with Johnny holding onto him and the water breaking over their feet and ankles.

When he did let go Daniel took his hand. "Lead me to your favorite taco shop."

Johnny nodded scooping up his shoes with his free hand

Daniel was glad he wore flip flops, a habit from Okinawa, but his shoes stuck a little in the wet sand and he nearly lost one. Johnny laughed softly as Daniel hopped around, windmilling but not falling, leaning against Johnny before turning and catching his shoe before it floated away. Johnny put his own shoes back on in a much easier fashion.

They walked down the sidewalk a couple of blocks to a little shop, a tiny hole in the wall that Daniel wouldn't have ever noticed.

There was only one little old lady working. She was tiny. Smaller than Daniel. She lit up when they walked in. It smelled amazing and the walls were colorful with large paintings on the walls.

She walked around the counter and held up her hands to Johnny patting his face in her hands and speaking slowly in Spanish. Johnny laughed and responded. Daniel heard his name and she smiled nodding her head to him. She asked Johnny something and he nodded and began listing things off.

Daniel heard tacos. That was the only thing he recognized.

She nodded and then walked into the back.

Johnny turned to Daniel and motioned to a table.

Daniel hooked his legs around Johnny's when they took their seats. Johnny glanced at him and Daniel grinned. After a while, she brought them their food. Two glasses of milk and plates of tacos.

"Gracias," Daniel said with a smile.

Daniel took a sip of his drink. It *wasn't* milk. It was sweet and cinnamony

"Horchata," Johnny explained. He pointed towards the large plate of tacos between them. "Pork carnitas, tacos de Suadero, tacos al Pastor," he said pointing to each as he went. "sour cream, rice, guacamole, beans, and nopales salad."

"Okay, I got most of that, what's nopales?"

"Cactus," Johnny said. "She had to show me to figure out what it was. It's good. All of it's good. Everything on the menu."

Daniel laughed, "Of course everything's good, you found a grandma. Their cooking is always the best."

Johnny nodded warmly.

It wasn't neat. It was messy. But it was delicious.

Daniel wondered how many other little hidden gems Johnny had. Between this and the carhop, it seemed like he kept them to himself, a collection of well-loved places he felt safe in.

He wondered how often Johnny came here. When it started. How he'd found it. The best thing he could do was ask.

"How'd you find this place?" Daniel asked before picking up his third taco and digging in.

"I was pretty little. Some kids were chasing me and I knew the safest thing to do was see if I could hide out in a shop. So I ran in here. Had a bloody nose and a black eye and she ran out and chased off the kids yelling at them in Spanish. One of the schools I went to was in this area. So I'd come here after school and sometimes before. She'd give me molletes for breakfast if I came by early and she wasn't busy. She'd give me snacks too after school, usually fruit. And then when I got an allowance and moved schools I'd still come back when I could. Took me a long time to learn how to read the actual menu and I was really bad at it for a long time. But everything she makes is amazing."

Johnny in Okinawa made more sense all of a sudden. How he'd caught on so fast how to communicate with people without knowing how to talk to them. How to utilize a few words and phrases. He looked around the shop again, taking in the art, the pictures, the colorful decorations. The elderly woman came back after a while holding a dish. She spoke to Johnny who held out his hands palm up and she smiled putting a cookie in them then turned to Daniel who quickly followed suit. The cookie was large and flat.

"Polvorones," she said slowly with a smile.

"Gracias," Daniel said.

Daniel had a large extended family. Lots of cousins, lots of aunts and uncles. Great aunts and great uncles. And it seemed at first glance that Johnny was alone. That it was just him and his mom and his awful stepfather who thankfully was getting booted soon. But Johnny collected his own family and just hadn't realized it. He didn't have grandparents but he had sought out replacements who took him in, made sure he ate the same way that Daniel's did.

Safe havens away from home to hide out from others. People who watched out for him gave him cookies and made sure he ate when he was hungry. The carhop ladies were probably like aunts for him when he was little, or big sisters. And he was sure there were more. He'd just run into trouble when trying to find a father, ending up with Kreese. But what Mrs. Lawrence had said made sense. How when Johnny let you in it became a strong bond. This was it in action.

It was like when Daniel had taken Johnny home. A chance to introduce him to part of his family. Johnny was doing the same, he just didn't realize it. Taking him to his favorite places and introducing him to his favorite people. He just didn't know he was introducing him to his adopted family. It was the same as what Daniel felt he wanted

to do. And it warmed his heart.

No Responsibilities

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Knowing his mother wasn't dying or sick was a relief.

He had a million questions but he could be patient. He *would* be patient. He'd focus on other things. Like how happy Daniel was eating good food and how shocked and delighted he was when the Abuela brought them cookies.

No matter how often Johnny tried to learn her name she laughed and squeezed his arm and said for him to call her Abuela.

He'd met some of her family before. Her sons and daughters brought her grandkids by at least several times a week. He'd known them better when he was little. The grandkids had been older than him but had been the only nice kids he'd known at the time. Taught him to skateboard outside the shop. He was pretty sure they were finishing up college soon. Abuela was very proud of them, usually showed Johnny pictures, the most recent ones.

And yup, there she went to go get the photos to give him updates on her family. He looked over the photos and smiled listening.

Daniel leaned forward curious and she seemed delighted in his interest.

Johnny's Spanish wasn't great, but it sounded like the eldest had decided to pursue her masters. Johnny couldn't figure out what she was studying but Abuela looked proud.

She clapped her hands with thought and went back into the back of the shop and came out with a bag full of tamales.

She always did that, ever since he was small. Sent him out with tamales. *Extras* she said. Leftovers she couldn't sell. Even when Johnny tried to pay for those she swatted at his hands. She only ever let him pay for tacos. Never the cookies she made. Those weren't on the menu.

So when he had money he used Jimmy to find out who her suppliers were and tried to get her the best deals he could. Paid for as much as

he could in advance. Jimmy hadn't ever been in the shop but had written the address down on a list, had worked with him to make sure her soda in the fridges always came with at least a crate that was free. That it was all dirt cheap. Because he didn't want her to get suspicious. The price never rose.

At one point he'd thought about trying to buy the lot and gift it to her when her son mentioned that she still rented, but it was too expensive. And no one would sell it to him because he'd been a kid, a minor. And now that he was nearly 18 he was out of money.

She smiled warmly at the two of them as she pressed the bag of tamales into Daniel's hands and Johnny paid.

It was kind of like a game of who could make everything cheaper for the other. She always made the food so cheap for him, so he tried to make everything else cheaper for her. He wished he could keep doing that. Maybe again someday. But it sounded like everything was going well. That all her kids and grandkids were doing well. Happy. It was a relief. That, *someone*, was doing well and happy who deserved it.

When they left the shop Daniel took Johnny's hand and held up the bag. "So what's this?"

"I think she thinks I still don't eat enough or have enough to eat, so she always sends me home with tamales."

He'd tried to tell her he was okay a million times. Tried to tell her that he lived in the Hills now and could pay for the food. But she would ignore him. It was like the Spanish he knew was suddenly broken. He'd even asked one of the librarians who was bilingual for help and he'd memorized the phrase and she still ignored him. Still gave him tamales.

Daniel laughed softly. "Sounds like a grandmother's love."

"It's frustrating, I want to make sure she's making money, and she's given me so much free food. It helped a lot when I was little. But I'm not starving anymore. And she won't let me help. Unless it's to get something that's too high. I tried to help her carry in a supply of sodas because it was heavy and she shooed me away and gave me a cookie. Made her son do it."

"Poor guy, couldn't show off your muscles," Daniel teased.

"Did you like it?" Johnny asked.

He knew Daniel had, but he wanted to hear it. It'd been on his face. But he wanted to ask anyway. Wanted to point out that he also knew good places. And wanted confirmation that it was the best.

"It was delicious," Daniel said warmly. "And I can't wait to try these. But I'm too full."

Johnny smiled. Daniel had talked during their meal about the stuff he was reading, a continuation of the conversation from before, and the list of questions he was making for the guys and all the things he didn't understand and all the things he did understand.

"Did Mr. Miyagi leave us anything to do?" Johnny asked.

"I didn't see any notes," Daniel said.

"What do you want to do then? We don't have any responsibilities, or plans, or anything we have to do as far as I know."

Daniel stopped walking and Johnny stopped a split second after, turning to look back at him. His eyes were wide.

"*We don't!* We've been so busy forever, there have always been things to do, but the guys are all busy today and Mr. Miyagi can *easily* spend all day fishing. Ma's in Jersey. We don't have school or homework. I'm not going to college so I don't have to prep for that."

Johnny nodded.

"I haven't been contacted to babysit or go to the animal sanctuary."

Daniel looked thoughtful like it was a huge decision. Like there were a lot of things he wanted to do, a million of them or so and he had to pick the best one. They'd done a lot of stuff during the year with the guys, but there was still a lot they *hadn't*. There was still plenty more to see and do.

They hadn't really asked Daniel what he wanted to do now that Johnny thought about it. Just created a fun itinerary under an assumption. And some of it had paid off.

Daniel had loved going to the mountains. Had loved going to different sports games. The one concert they'd all gone to see. He'd loved Golf 'n Stuff's water park on prom night, swimming in the lake.

It really looked like he was going through a mental list, trying to make

a choice, comparing them all, struggling to pick the one he wanted to right then and there.

"Okay," Daniel said glancing at his watch. "How about-wait no-damn-okay- yes *okay*, I haven't seen the pier yet...no, wait that's the same as Coney Island right? Kind of? Fuck. Uh, oh! I know, hiking. Let's go hiking."

Johnny looked down at Daniel's flip-flops with an amused smile, "We'll have to stop by Mr. Miyagi's first."

"Okay, easy," Daniel said. "Mr. Miyagi's and then hiking."

Daniel turned to pull Johnny along.

"That works out, we can put the tamales away, do they go in the fridge? Freezer? Think Mr. Miyagi will like them? We can eat them for dinner. How do you reheat them? We'll change, grab some water and snacks and go hiking. Are there a lot of trails? Ma said it was like a popular thing her coworkers did on the weekend. So there's got to be a lot of them right?"

He was excited and it was infectious. They hadn't gotten a chance to go on a real date before. Johnny supposed they'd kind of gone on dates. But the guys were usually around, or Kumiko. It seemed weird to count them as dates. And after a month of technically dating, they hadn't really been on a date.

He knew which trail he wanted to go on. One with a good view. He had a good idea of an end goal that Daniel would like. Or he hoped he would. But he was curious now.

"Do you have a list of things you want to do?"

Daniel was walking ahead of him like he was in a hurry, pulling him along. He paused turning back.

"*So many things*," he said with a playful grin.

Johnny wondered if they could spend the days the guys were busy going to these places Daniel wanted to go to. They'd have to budget. Daniel wanted to buy and start a shop for Mr. Miyagi and Johnny had made money in Okinawa, but it wouldn't last forever. And this moment, while they were both free without responsibilities, was precious.

He didn't know if they'd have a chance like it again. The space in time before Daniel opened the shop and gifted it to Mr. Miyagi and before they'd have to get jobs of some kind or go to school. There were plenty of free things to do if Johnny thought about it. He'd only done free things when he was younger. Going with his mom on the few days she had off. But he didn't know what was on Daniel's list.

"You'll have to write it down," Johnny said. "We can budget and make a plan."

He sounded like Tommy. What the hell. Planning? Tommy would be proud though. Maybe they could write the free ones down and put them into a bowl or something and on days where they were free, they could pull one out of the jar. A date jar. Maybe that was too sappy.

Daniel's hand tightened around his, moving faster towards the Ford.

They had enough time.

It was just going to be hot out.

Sunny.

They should grab hats and sunglasses.

Johnny thought he had a pair in the glove box of his Avanti.

Daniel was talking about some family member who hiked a lot. How there were long trails you could do through the mountains. How this cousin took like half a year off to hike from Georgia to Maine. He was tapping his fingers on the steering wheel trying to think.

Appalachian trail was what it was called. Telling Johnny that it was over 2,000 miles.

Maybe *that* should've been part of Johnny's escape plan. He could've just gone hiking and disappeared on the trails for like half a year. He knew California was part of the PCT. He could've gotten on the trail and hiked north and then when he found some town he liked just move in there.

It would've meant leaving the Avanti behind though, which he couldn't have done. Though he might've had to if he'd run away to the woods.

Daniel was talking about how this cousin had talked them all into hiking around Jersey and how getting all the LaRusso's in one spot was a feat, and trying to get them to hike was kind of hilarious. How he'd found his uncles playing a card game on the trail having gotten too tired to continue on and drinking. How they'd made him promise not to tell his aunts. Only to find his aunts sitting by a stream chatting away and drinking from a shared bottle of wine. Laughing and telling him not to tell his uncles.

Almost no one finished the trail but the one cousin. Daniel had tried really hard but he'd tripped and skinned his knee and his Mom had made him stop so she could bandage it up and sent him back to the car.

He was talking with one of his hands, the other on the wheel as he drove them back to Mr. Miyagi's.

The truck was still gone. Mr. Miyagi was still out fishing. The guy's cars weren't there either.

It was kind of weird being there without Mr. Miyagi being there.

On their own.

It was quiet, but it was *too quiet.*

Mr. Miyagi was a quiet man, but he hummed and sometimes he sang and Johnny sometimes could hear him moving around. But he wasn't there.

Daniel was talking still on the walk into the house, walking backward talking excitedly, moving on from family hiking trips to snacks they could take.

He was talking about grapes he'd seen in the fridge. Maybe a nice snack. He wasn't hungry though.

Just like Johnny expected Daniel went down, flip-flops being his downfall. He'd been walking as close as he could and reached out to catch him.

"You know, I already know you like me, you don't have to keep falling for me," Johnny said with a smile.

Daniel was looking up at him eyes wide, shocked he'd tripped and Johnny watched him blush and then laugh. "You know I was going to

tease you about the same thing."

"Me? I don't fall that much."

"You lose your balance often enough around me."

Johnny leaned down towards Daniel who hadn't tried to right himself yet.

"Maybe we just keep falling for each other?"

Daniel smiled, reaching his arms up and hooking them around Johnny's neck.

"It would seem so," he said softly meeting him in a kiss.

It was an unhurried, slow, languid kiss.

Everything was always so hectic. Everything always felt busy.

They had things they wanted to do that day but there wasn't a rush. No one was waiting for them.

It was almost the kind of slow kiss that Daniel seemed to like to give him in the mornings.

Johnny knew he used to wake up first, but he hadn't in a long while. It was like he'd been trained out of it. That by having Daniel close so much had led to him having fewer nightmares, fewer sleepless nights. That they woke up around the same time.

They could laze in bed for a few extra moments and it always felt so decadent after always being in a hurry, always having to be aware of his surroundings, of sleeping so lightly, ready for anything, ready to grab his walkman and jump out the window to not be found.

Johnny didn't want to go back. He wanted to stay in Daniel's bed, in his room, to keep kissing him nice and slow in the mornings, in the afternoons, in the evenings, whenever.

His mother had asked if he knew what he wanted, she meant as a job, a plan for the future.

And he'd never really let himself think about what he wanted, just good places to hide where he wouldn't be found.

He didn't want much. All he wanted was currently in his arms, kissing

him back, and he didn't know how to tell her that there was nothing else he wanted. That he already had it.

Chapter End Notes

Conversions:
The Appalachian trail that goes from Georgia to Maine is around 2,000 miles or about 3218 km. There's a map you can see of it here: link

The PCT is the Pacific Crest Trail, it goes from Mexico to Canada. Map can be found here: link

Hiking Date

Chapter Notes

> The research for this chapter varied vastly. So I took creative liberties with some law-related things.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daniel pulled away first even though he didn't want to.

He did want to go hiking.

Though staying home and spending time with Johnny also was something he wanted to do.

He liked the way Johnny never seemed ready to stop, seemed disappointed whenever he pulled away. Like Johnny could easily spend all day like that without getting tired.

It'd be a fun thing to test out someday. It made him tempted to not go hiking. To just spend the day in their room.

But they'd made plans.

He wanted to see which hiking trail Johnny had in mind.

He smiled warmly at Johnny. And turned so that he could go get ready. Had to change his shoes at least.

He *knew* Johnny hadn't caught his flirting teasing. Knew he was thinking *dates*.

So Daniel would make two lists. He'd write down the date list, the places he wanted to go.

And he'd keep the other one in his head. He didn't want anyone to find that one. He'd seen Dutch open the drawer to his desk to get a pen and look at him pointedly. A *damn Daniel you got enough photos of Johnny?* The answer was *no*.

But Dutch had brought a packet of photos fresh from the printers and added them to the drawer.

Daniel hadn't gotten a chance to look because he didn't want anyone else to look in the drawer.

He'd have to look later. If the guys came by again then he'd be out of luck, but he could look while Johnny showered that night.

Before he went to their room he dropped the tamales off in the fridge.

He wondered if Johnny even realized that he'd been adopted by that grandmother. It sounded like he hadn't. She'd even brought out photos to show them the rest of the family. It was so sweet.

He finished getting ready quickly and met Johnny at the Avanti. Johnny drove and Daniel armed with a notebook and pen went to work making a list.

- Dancing
- Santa Monica Pier
- Angeles National Forest
- Drive-in Theater
- Runyon Canyon
- Cooking-make one of Ma's recipes

He chewed on his bottom lip thoughtfully.

They'd already been to Dodgers Stadium with the guys. He wanted to do something else sporty.

He'd liked skating in Central Park.

He kind of missed competing against Johnny. He thought maybe Johnny thought Daniel was a little fragile. Worried he'd break him if they played a game or competed. Essentially went from one extreme to the other. But he kind of hoped after the deathmatch in Okinawa and breaking the ice that may be Johnny realized that Daniel could take him. That the tournament *wasn't* a fluke.

- Bike on a trail
- Spar
- Surfing

Sparing was a big one. He wanted to see how they compared to one another now. After Johnny had been training under Mr. Miyagi.

It wasn't a date, but he wanted to make it a date.

Maybe sparing as a date was weird.

Maybe it belonged on the mental list. He thought about erasing it. It

was becoming a to-do list and not a date list. He was half tempted to make a to-do list and just sneak Johnny's name on there. See if he'd even notice.

He wasn't even sure if Johnny had a bike. The guys had left Daniel's Mongoose parked next to Mr. Miyagi's house when they moved all of his stuff from South Seas. But Johnny's things were all at the mansion and that was currently a no-go zone.

It'd be fun to go for a ride on his Honda XL 600R but who knew if that was still in one piece since Sid was cornered? Who knew what of Johnny's stuff was still in one piece?

Daniel had wanted to do so much related to the mansion. He'd wanted to go through Johnny's closet to look at the fancy expensive suits. See what the options were. Wanted to see the trophies that hadn't been out any time he visited. He knew Johnny had them. But he didn't know where they were. He didn't think Sid would destroy trophies. But he didn't actually know.

He wanted to take a closer look at the books on his shelf. To go through all the music, listen to as much as he could. Figure out where their tastes overlapped.

Johnny had brought some to Okinawa. It hadn't just been a language tape.

He wanted to drive Johnny's bike. Wanted to swim in the pool. But Sid poisoned the whole place. All the normal things Daniel wanted to do, explore, and just get to know Johnny from his room, just weren't possible because of Sid.

- Swimming
- Day trips to other cities
- picnic

He wanted it to be more than day trips. Wanted to stay somewhere nice and explore other cities, just the two of them. But budgeting was going to be a problem.

There was more he wanted to do but he couldn't think of them all. It'd just have to be a work in progress list.

He wanted to go dancing a lot.

Wanted to go back to the carhop just the two of them.

Johnny parked the Avanti and Daniel looked around. He spotted a sign for Griffith Park.

Daniel turned back and Johnny was right there, leaning in close, eyes on the notebook, reading through the list.

"I can borrow Bobby's bike," Johnny said. "There's a lot of trails and places to bike. It's mostly free. If you like it we can do it frequently."

Daniel lifted Johnny's chin, if he was going to sneak up, that close without warning then Daniel was going to quell the shock that'd run through him with a kiss. A little revenge as he pulled away and licked his lips with a grin.

"Sounds fun," Daniel said turning and pushing the door of the Avanti open and stretching, ready to go hiking. He turned.

Johnny seemed to be frozen in the spot Daniel had left him. He grinned, leaning over the car door and kissing him again.

"Hiking. Don't have to really think Johnny, just got to move," he said with a teasing smile.

It took Johnny a moment like he had to restart his brain, but he locked up and led the way to the trail.

Daniel tried to explain the list. Tried to come up with excuses for sparring being on the list. Tried to list all the reasons why they should do it. *Sparring.*

It'd be like dancing but competitive and fun.

They hadn't really sparred much.

And now they had the same sensei.

They could see if there were differences in how they'd learned.

See what Johnny's background brought to the table.

He tried to make it sound romantic and not something Daniel thought would be hot. Tried desperately to underplay it and explain it, circling around trying to make points that didn't give himself away.

It'd be like biking or surfing or dancing or playing soccer with the guys. Just fun and sporty. They were sporty guys. It just made sense. Right?

Or had he lost his mind because the thought of sparring with Johnny sent blood rushing in the wrong direction. Of trying to pin him to the mat or the dojo floor or the grass or sand or wherever they did it made him lose track of whatever he was saying.

If they weren't fighting, they could make it fun. Maybe too fun. Maybe karate wasn't supposed to be fun in that way. But Daniel wanted to try.

They reached a clearing. He was nervous.

Would it be bad or good if Johnny saw through him?

Was it weird?

Johnny usually couldn't see through him. Usually, it seemed like it missed the mark most of the time.

"Okay," Johnny said.

Okay. OKAY? Sparing could be a date.

Daniel was delighted.

Johnny had stopped walking and Daniel was studying him, heart pounding.

It was going to be a total misuse of karate. Not for defense. He could *never ever* tell Mr. Miyagi. Though maybe-no. **Never**.

Johnny turned back to him and smiled.

He was so fucking lucky.

He took Johnny's hand.

"Well, what do you think?" Johnny asked.

Daniel blinked and took in the view. He could see LA, the Hollywood sign, the view encompassed a lot and Johnny looked pleased. The sun was getting lower in the sky. The sunset would be beautiful soon.

He hadn't seen much of the Hollywood sign. He'd seen it, driven past it, and seen it in the distance, but this view was better.

He looked back, Johnny was watching him with a warm smile.

"It's pretty," Daniel said softly. Surprised.

He wasn't sure what he'd expected Johnny to pick when he suggested hiking. But beautiful city views and the Hollywood sign weren't amongst them.

Johnny nodded and turned continuing on the path.

He wondered if sparring didn't seem weird to Johnny because he *also* studied karate. If that was a given. In which case the other one that might've been showing too much of his hand was the drive-in.

Couples didn't usually go to drive-ins to watch the film. Not usually. Usually, it was...for more. But that one was so normal that he doubted it was a problem. And he should've just been happy that Johnny was willing to spar for fun.

The sun was setting, turning the skies brilliant pinks and purples when they stopped again.

Daniel knew to take the view in again, and it was breathtaking.

Another gorgeous view of everything.

Johnny then turned. There was a large building that Daniel had seen several times but never had fully taken in. They both walked in and Daniel was surprised they didn't have to pay, following Johnny to join a line.

"There's always a free presentation," Johnny said with a smile.

Of what Daniel wondered, he must've missed the signs. Missed all the clues too focused on daydreaming of sparring. But then the doors opened and he found himself looking at a large telescope in a big room.

A staff member came out and explained the Zeiss telescope and the other ones the observatory had available for guests to see. They explained how a refracting telescope worked and how it weighed over 9,000 pounds or 4082 kilograms. Daniel just stared at it. It was massive. And the ceiling was open, he could see the sky above as the sky darkened.

They got to look through it and Daniel had never gotten to look through such a high-powered telescope. Had never seen the moon like that or the stars.

He was speechless for a moment. He'd thought the stars were beautiful in Okinawa and that in LA you couldn't see them at all. But it seemed he just hadn't been aware that there was a spot to see them up close.

After the presentation, they wandered through the exhibits, sat for the planetarium show. After exploring every inch they walked back to the car.

Daniel talking about the stars and all the things he thought were cool on the way back, holding Johnny's hand, excited.

Without a doubt that was a date. A good date. Perfect surprises. Perfect views. Daniel was excited for the rest of them. He'd keep adding to the list. Trade it with Johnny so he could add all these little things he knew that Daniel didn't know were available.

They fell into a simple routine.

Slow mornings, notes from Mr. Miyagi that he'd gone fishing, and Daniel would drive Johnny to the place that wanted him to just talk, then they'd go somewhere for lunch. Frequenting the beach so Johnny could just re-center himself after a morning of talking so much which meant tacos, which meant hiking and then coming home to have dinner with Mr. Miyagi and to hear about the fish he'd caught. They ate a lot of fish for dinner.

It was nice. And then life caught up with them.

Johnny didn't have to go talk anymore but the parents of the kids he babysat asked if he could watch them for the day.

Daniel didn't know what he was going to do for the day alone, but he noticed Mr. Miyagi hadn't left to go fishing, had put on a tan suit after Johnny had left, and had a frown on his face.

The guys showed up. More suits. They looked tired.

"Johnny-san babysitting," Mr. Miyagi said when they arrived, pouring coffee for them.

"Oh good," Bobby said.

"Is something happening?" Daniel asked.

"The judge is announcing her decision today," Jimmy said running a

hand through his hair with a sigh.

"You can come too if you want. She just wanted to listen to Johnny's statement. It was the last part."

"He made a statement? When?" Daniel hadn't left Johnny alone since they'd gotten home.

"They had someone sit down with him and collect statements on his life in the mansion with Sid. His relationship with his Mom," Tommy said softly.

"We've sat through everything else, we're going to sit through this too. We're going to-"

"Have no fear?" Bobby asked with a melancholy amused smile.

"Shit, no, all the fear. The guys a piece of work. I'd rather beat the shit out of him, but Mrs. Lawrence wanted to go through everything through the legal channels so this is how we're doing this," Dutch said with a frown.

"Anyway, if you want to come you can. But it's not necessary. It's not a pleasant thing. It hasn't been since the start. It's been vile but this is finally the end," Jimmy said.

"Okay, is there a dress code?" Daniel said looking at them.

"Anything nice should be fine. A button-up. A suit is unnecessary, we just- it looks better for Mrs. Lawrence."

Daniel nodded turning to go change. A button-up with a blazer and slacks, his black shoes. Worrying his lower lip as he got ready.

"You can ride with me if you want," Bobby said. "Mr. Miyagi's coming with me too."

Daniel nodded follow him and watching the other car head out with Jimmy driving Tommy and Dutch.

"You okay?" Daniel asked.

"Hmm? Oh, me? Yeah. Er. No. We're all kind of pissed off. And it's hard to know what to do with it. Before we would've just gone to karate and got it all out. Or, I guess we took it out on you too. But this is...it's so much worse than anything we were angry about before. Like I knew *something* was bad. Like things were wrong. I just, I thought

she knew you know? She said she'd only seen him yell at Johnny once and she put Sid in his place immediately. Threatened to leave on the spot. He apologized and said he'd never do it again. It seems like he just hid it after that. Pretended to just be strict. She didn't know about the staff, or all the stuff he said to Johnny or all the violence," Bobby said, his hands tightening around the steering wheel. "We knew something was wrong but not how bad. We smelled the smoke but Johnny always brushed it off so we didn't investigate for the fire. We spent the night thinking we could catch if something was really wrong and we never did. I should've tried harder. I mean I've failed him twice now. Sid and Kreese. I couldn't stop either of them."

"Bobby-san not responsible for bad man's actions," Mr. Miyagi said gently from the back. "Good friend. Keep friend afloat in storm."

Bobby blinked rapidly, looking up.

"Thanks Mr. Miyagi."

He sighed after a while.

"There's so much I learned. I hadn't known that before Sid they were homeless. That the florist she worked at originally when she had Johnny was this sweet old couple who treated her like their kid, treated Johnny like their grandkid. Wanted them to take over, make it a family business. They were his godparents, but then they died suddenly. She'd tried to keep it going but the funeral expenses ate up everything. The shop had to close and it just domino affected everything else."

Bobby shook his head and let out a soft humorless laugh.

"I found out that apparently, *my parents* are now Johnny's godparents. She's been absolutely terrified of something happening and leaving Johnny alone. Like she didn't have many people to trust with that responsibility until he was like 12 or 13 and it was *my* parents. I didn't know my parents hung out with her, or ever even talked to her. I mean they went to benefits or whatever but they never mentioned it. And that's the thing I learned. She's just like Johnny. You could never know just by looking at her all the shit she's been through. She hides everything so well. They're both frighteningly good at it."

"Where's she been staying?" Daniel asked softly.

"She was going to stay at a hotel. But she's been staying with us. Which turned into this stupid whole thing when *all* of our, the guys

and my, guardians were in one spot. Jimmy's parents wanted to know why she wasn't crashing with them, reminding her they had more space. And Tommy's aunt and uncle reminded her of the beach house. And like I didn't even know they all knew each other. Let alone the fact that she meets them for brunch. Even Dutch's parents, who *hate everyone* and I almost never ever see wanted her to stay with them. I've never seen so many adults fall over one another to try and be more accommodating.

"She picked my place because while you guys were in Okinawa that's where Johnny called. So you guys would call I'd relay it to her *and* the guys. And if I was busy because we were planning or something one of the other guys would stay and watch the phone. She didn't want to confuse him if she answered. And sometimes we had to be at the courthouse. So it fluctuated who was on phone duty.

"Also living with her was interesting. She seems very...what you'd expect an Encino Hills lady to be like right? Designer head to toe, but it's all learned, all trained, just like Johnny. My little siblings loved her because she didn't care that my little sister wanted to do her makeup and *god*, my little sister does not know how to do make-up at all. And my little brother thought that looked like fun and tried doing her hair. And she just told them that it was fabulous. It was sincere.

"She didn't worry about food, we eat junk food because Mom and Dad are always baking they have no time or energy or desire to cook and *she cooked*. A little. And didn't complain about the amount of junk food we ate or had around the house. It wasn't a need for some organic anything. No special diet.

"She was so busy but she like kept checking in on *me*. And the guys. Every day we showed up she said we didn't have to be there, that she knew we cared an awful lot and didn't have to sit through this. She did most of the leg work. Most of the calling. Most of the collecting witnesses and people to attest to whatever they could. The sleuthing. Tommy legit was in awe and still is. Keeps talking about what a great detective she could be. But he likes those. Detective novels and comics. And every time Sid opened his damn mouth we wanted to hit him. We had to distract ourselves. Because it was like a full-time job to keep ourselves in our seats. *Especially Dutch.*

"I ended up starting the sticker thing because we needed a reward for the bare minimum of just staying in our damn seats. Like every time Sid said some bullshit, we didn't try to get up? Great we each get a sticker. And then it just kept going. I've got so many stickers in my

pocket now. The stationary store thinks I'm a teacher's assistant or something for a kindergarten or preschool. I don't know how to tell them I'm trying to keep four teenage boys, myself included, from running across a courtroom and straight-up murdering some evil Hollywood monster before the law takes over. I'm rambling, sorry."

Daniel shook his head. "It sounds like a lot."

"Yeah," Bobby said. "I mean it's not like you all had a better time in the beginning in Okinawa."

"It got better," Daniel said softly.

"I can't believe how quickly he went from thinking we weren't interested in you guys anymore. Like he must've thought we weren't happy for him anymore. *He just accepted it.* And I fucking missed it. Didn't even notice."

"You've had a lot on your plate," Daniel said.

"At least I *have* a plate. Johnny's just been catching scalding liquid with his bare hands without a complaint or a word for years. Since kindergarten. We saw his school record. He changed schools all the fucking time. Like no wonder when we floated the idea of all going to high school together he jumped on it," Bobby sighed pulling into the parking lot.

Daniel followed him out of the car. He crossed to where Bobby stood and pulled him into a hug. "You are his best friend and being there, just being there, does him so much good."

"I still feel like such a failure of a best friend."

"Bobby, you got your own shit going on," Daniel said. "This wasn't your job, you've done great."

"He's right," Dutch said and Daniel felt him join the hug and the other guys after they got out of their car. "This has been hell. But man, did you see how comfortable Johnny's been since he got back from Okinawa? He's going to be okay. You gotta give yourself some slack. I mean you're the one holding *us* together man."

"But Jimmy is doing all the hard work."

Jimmy laughed softly. "I'm a gopher. This would be so much worse without you guys helping. I've been debating asking you all to just

check on me when I'm in the courtrooms just from time to time. Just like a confidence boost that y'all are around and I'm not going to lose it because I'm not the only one pissed off."

"Besides the stickers really help," Tommy said warmly. "And all the baked goods you bring. I've eaten so many cupcakes and cookies with my coffee on our breaks. It's like the only part of the day I look forward to."

"Not even when Ali came?" Dutch teased.

"Oh hell no, that was brutal," Tommy whispered.

"You guys held hands though," Dutch said.

"Yeah, I've also held your guy's hands during this whole thing because it's fucking awful," Tommy said.

"He has a point," Jimmy said. "Let's go see this through huh?"

Jimmy said that but the guys didn't budge.

"We'll do something fun after," Daniel suggested. "I could make dinner."

"Yesssss," Dutch said.

"That would be nice," Bobby agreed.

And they broke apart like all they'd needed was something to look forward to.

"Boys ready? Remember," Mr. Miyagi said, "Breathe. Very important. Breathe."

"Yes, Mr. Miyagi," came as a group response.

Mr. Miyagi smiled and followed them into the building.

Daniel hadn't been into a courthouse before. Just seen them on TV. In some of the dramas his mother watched.

He sat with the guys and Mr. Miyagi while they waited.

He saw Sid on the other side of the room.

Saw how he had a smug look on his face.

Looked confident and unworried.

Mrs. Lawrence was there as well. Shoulders back, head held high, her lawyer talking to her softly.

The judge came out and spoke.

Bobby grabbed Daniel's hand. The guys were pale.

Daniel thought it had to be obvious who would win.

Laura was Johnny's mother, not Sid's kid and Sid was abusive.

The system couldn't be that blind right?

But they looked like they were so damn worried as she spoke. As she discussed the evidence she'd gone over.

The number of witnesses that she talked about was intense.

It sounded like anyone who cared about Johnny had shown up to talk about him, not just the guys and Mr. Miyagi.

Teachers had come, librarians, Ali, the guys' parents and family who knew him, people whose names Daniel didn't recognize.

All taking time out of their summer to go through the grueling task of talking about Mrs. Lawrence and her son.

Painting a better picture for the judge to understand the situation.

He wondered if it was because Sid looked so smug. Because he didn't look like he had any remorse, any fear.

Or maybe they knew something he didn't know. Maybe he *was* more powerful than Daniel thought.

She spoke about listening to Johnny's statement. How she was thinking that due to the neglect, whether or not someone *else* should be caring for him.

Sid looked too damn smug.

Was this why?

Instead of keeping Johnny himself, he'd make it so that Laura wouldn't get to keep him either?

Even with only a month left? How petty.

She kept talking about Mr. Miyagi taking care of the boy and how such an honorable war veteran was arguably the best choice. But with only a month left she'd let Laura decide if he lived with her *or* Mr. Miyagi.

Daniel wanted to hop up and cheer, but Bobby's hand tightened around his and he shook his head. They weren't holding hands for just comfort, but to keep each other in line, from jumping up. From speaking. From vaulting over the seats and running full sprints at Sid to see how much damage they could do before someone pulled them off.

Mr. Miyagi stood and said he would accept responsibility for Johnny if wished before sitting back down.

The judge nodded and made a note. Then she moved some papers and began listing off things.

Property, the mansion, the land on it, the cars, the art, the amount of money Sid had, every single thing worth anything was listed off.

She gave a date and turned her head to Sid.

"Generally these are several different cases. But I've been given permission to make a decision on all of them," she said. "Divorce and child custody is usually family court, while abuse goes under a criminal court judge. But because there's one month, we're making all decisions now. Mr. Weinburg your divorce has been decided upon. You will pay emotional damages, the mansion and land and half the art, half the cars, and half of your finances will go to Mrs. Lawrence. For the rest of your things, you will have a third party go to collect them and put them into storage for you. You will partake in a 52-week batterer intervention program, will take part in substance abuse and anger management programs. Under California Penal Code 273d and 273a for abuse and endangerment, and the fact you seem to have absolutely no remorse for your actions I've decided to go with the maximum I'm allowed to. The numerous cases of visible injuries you did on purpose and the additional medical files I've gone over and witness statements are by no means anywhere close to the normal discipline of a child. These were the willful choices you made. The maximum sentence is a felony Mr. Weinburg, and time in state prison for 6 years. During which time you will attend these aforementioned classes and programs."

She kept talking but Daniel stopped listening as Bobby's hand was practically crushing his.

He patted Bobby's hand gently with his other free hand and that got it to release a little.

He glanced at Sid again. He was turning so angry red that he was nearly purpling.

He was shouting at the judge, at Laura that she'd still be on the damn streets if he hadn't taken her in.

His lawyer was trying to calm him down but Sid punched the lawyer in the face.

Guards had to get him and restrain him.

The judge sighed. "I'll add that to the list. You're already digging yourself pretty deep there Mr. Weinburg. Keep going if you want. I can just add to your sentence."

He spluttered, shouting at her and she nodded, looking bored taking notes.

"When you calm down sir I'll let you know your revised sentence. Please note it's going up, not down. Everyone else you're dismissed. I'll get you the proper paperwork so you can get on with your life *Ms*. Lawrence."

Ms. Lawrence and her lawyer stood and walked out of the courtroom, she glanced at the boys and gave them a small smile and they quickly got up with Mr. Miyagi and left as well.

Daniel stood down the hall with the guys and Mr. Miyagi. Jimmy sunk to the floor with a groan.

"That's *one* that's finally over."

Bobby pulled out a packet of stickers and stuck it onto Jimmy's suit. "Good job. Hang in there. You're doing very well. You just got to find whoever actually owns Cobra Kai and then hopefully you'll be done."

Jimmy laughed, it was dry and humorless. "Guy's a ghost. I thought I had a clue but the DA I wanted to talk with but he stopped taking my calls."

Bobby gave him a second sticker then turned to Tommy. "You didn't

cry this time. Good job."

Tommy looked down at the sticker on his jacket. "There's still time yet," he said softly.

"Dutch you didn't even attempt to jump over the seats this time when he started cursing out the judge or Ms. Lawrence. And you didn't mutter curses under your breath the whole time. Progress."

Dutch nodded like he knew he'd been good and deserved his stickers.

Bobby turned. "You nearly got up and cheered. But you caught on. Good job." He stuck a sticker on Daniel's shirt.

Daniel nearly burst out laughing but he grabbed the stickers from Bobby instead and stuck one on him. "Good job not actually crushing my hand."

Dutch laughed grabbing the stickers as well. "And not stomping your foot on mine when I mutter."

"You didn't cry this time either," Tommy said.

"Or just break apart."

Daniel heard the sound of high heels walking towards them and turned in time to see Ms. Lawrence pulling the boys into a hug. "Thank you for all of your help. I'm sorry that you lost your summer."

"Not a problem."

"Wouldn't have spent it any other way."

"Whatever to get rid of that bastard."

"Of course Ms. Lawrence."

She laughed softly. "Well, you guys do something fun. I'm going to go get Johnny. And then next week come by the mansion if you want."

"Divorce party?" Tommy asked.

She laughed and winked. "You'll see."

She turned to Mr. Miyagi and bowed. He looked surprised and bowed back.

"Thank you for everything Mr. Miyagi. Especially bringing us lunch every day since you've gotten back."

"My pleasure Ms. Lawrence."

Chapter End Notes

The judge was given permission by me to roll everything into one case because it felt too awful to have criminal cases and the divorce and custody cases separate. Also, I didn't want to dig around too much into details of the process because it felt like it'd be too...upsetting, to figure out how one of these cases would even go. The penal codes are accurate to California law and so are some of the consequences.

The Griffith Park and observatory stuff though is accurate. :D That was more enjoyable to research.

Steady Ground

Johnny took souvenirs for the kids. Cute puzzles and toys he'd been given from the aquarium.

They loved it and were so excited to see him.

He'd taken the sanshin to play for them, see if they wanted to learn.

It was fun.

He hadn't ever thought he'd be good with kids, but he liked working with them.

Then there was a knock on the door and he went and opened it.

Their parents had come home and they smiled, welcomed him back and gave him a hug, and then motioned behind them.

His mother stood wearing a black suit dress and high heels. She smiled and was holding paperwork in her hands.

He looked around. She didn't have her car.

"They picked me up," she said waving warmly at the parents that had walked past Johnny scooping up their kids.

Johnny rushed out the doors towards her.

"Are you okay?" he asked as she held out her arms and he gave her a big hug.

"Better than ever," she said warmly smoothing down his hair. "You mind going for a drive? Maybe the beach?"

He nodded.

She smiled and sat down in the Avanti holding her stack of paper and her purse on her lap.

She was quiet for the drive, hair going wild in the wind and not even bothering to try and corral it out of her face.

She wasn't dying. Daniel had promised him that.

She wasn't sick. But she did look better. Happier. Lighter.

He parked the Avanti and she hoped out stretching and walking down the boardwalk.

"You know when you were little we'd walk past here. We'd hang out on the beach but didn't spend a lot of time actually walking through here. I always wanted to sit down in a booth and buy you lunch or dinner but you would always take one look at the menu and would say you weren't hungry. You were so perceptive and would be so stubborn. If we couldn't both eat you didn't want to. And then somehow you started bringing home food. I never understood where you got it or where you found it until recently," she held his hand and walked straight up to an ice cream shop placing an order and letting go of his hand to pay.

She turned and pressed the ice cream into his hand. Holding her own. Mint chocolate chip for her, rocky road for him. The one he always looked at as a kid but never asked for. She hooked her arms through his.

"You never complained. Ate whatever you were given. Even when it was just toast and ketchup, or fried baloney. Never asked for anything until we moved in with Sid. And even then you never asked for that much. Just things you wanted to try and learn. A magic trick kit, snowboarding, drum lessons, guitar lessons, surfing, karate lessons. Which financially no matter how much Sid huffed and puffed over it never made any dent in his finances. I always wondered how I ended up so lucky," she said as they walked out to the beach, taking off her heels and dumping them and the papers into her purse before taking his arm again.

"I worried so much that not having enough food would stunt your growth, would make you sick. But then you grew like a *tree*. I always thought it was just you and me. But these last couple of months I realized that it wasn't. I don't know what other kids didn't like but you charmed almost every damn adult you ran into. I just don't think you ever realized it. I mean *I hadn't.* The manager from the car hop and the girls were delighted when I reached out to them. Said you came by with your boyfriend and his Mom. Said it was cute."

Johnny blushed bright red. They hadn't been dating then. Hadn't even really been friends.

She laughed softly. "I told them you hadn't been dating yet and they said you never brought anyone else by. So they assumed it had to be your boyfriend. Thought you were cute and serious since his mom was

with you."

She sat down in the sand.

"Mom, your dress," Johnny said worriedly.

She laughed, sounding delighted. "Sid bought it, who gives a shit if it gets dirty?"

Johnny stared at her, eyes wide and she patted to the space next to her. Johnny sat down in the sand next to her and she took his hand in hers, turning to face him.

"Our divorce has been finalized as of today. I didn't want you to worry about it. You worry about *everything*. About **me**. And I know you didn't say anything because you were worried about me. You kept everything in because you were worried about me. Even though I constantly tell you **I'm the Mom**."

"What will you do now?" Johnny asked softly, voice barely a whisper.

"I have more money now than I know what to do with, do not worry about me. I do want your opinion on some things though," she said.

Johnny nodded.

"Do you like the mansion at all? And be brutally honest."

Johnny shook his head.

She nodded turning back towards the water and eating her ice cream thoughtfully.

"Tommy asked if I wanted to host a divorce party. Did I tell you how much I like your friends?"

Johnny shook his head again.

She laughed warmly.

"All the country club people would consider that too gauche. But honestly, I'm not surprised, they've been quiet. All gone underground. Even the Mills. Except for Ali. She showed up. Also, you never told me Dutch was his last name."

"He doesn't like his first name or middle name," Johnny said softly. "It's what he wants to be called."

"Well I met Mr. and Mrs. Dutch for the first time," she said wrinkling her nose at the weirdness of it. "It was apparently a huge deal. Sid looked like he swallowed a bug. It was the only day in court he was silent. I didn't realize they were such busy hotshots, or that they didn't like anyone. But you know who they do like?"

Johnny looked at her confused.

"You. All of your friend's parents or guardians adore you."

"Wait, why did they go to your divorce proceedings?"

"Because we found the one judge in California with permission to do family court civil stuff and criminal proceedings in one fell swoop."

Johnny's eyes went wide turning to her again.

"I'm *fine*," she said quickly. "I think he knew if he tried anything with me I'd break his nose and walk. No, I-I learned all the stuff he did to *you*. I doubt I even learned all of it. So it went from just a general divorce to see if I could open a portal to hell and send him off with a first-class ticket. And it looks like I succeeded," she said warmly tapping her cone to his in a mini cheers.

"You'll never have to see the bastard again. When I left he was digging himself the rest of the way there on his own. He punched his own lawyer in the face and the whole thing erupted into chaos," she said with a laugh. "I can't believe I actually loved him at one point."

"I'm sorry Mom."

"Oh honey, you have nothing to apologize for."

"Was that what you meant with the flowers?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah, to hang in there because I was going to battle and that you wouldn't see me for a bit. Because the bastard threatened to try and get custody. And that gummed up the damn works. But because I didn't see it for so long it kind of lost me some ground. But Mr. Miyagi got it back for me. Came by every day around lunchtime with these little lunch boxes for us. Talked about all the stuff he was working on with you with the judge. She nearly gave him sole custody of you."

"Mr. Miyagi?" Johnny said surprised.

Laura laughed. "Yeah. He stood up today and said if it was wanted

he'd take responsibility for you."

Johnny rubbed away tears. "That's kind of weird right?"

She bumped her shoulder against him. "Why because you're dating like his adopted son?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe he just figured you're already his son-in-law."

Johnny blushed bright red and she grinned. "He would've had to fight though against all your godparents."

"*All* of my godparents?" Johnny asked looking at her.

"Did you know you can technically have as many godparents as you want for a kid?" she asked with a big grin.

"What did you do?"

She dug her feet in the sand and finished off her ice cream cone with a grin.

"*Mom*?"

"Well, when I was getting married to Sid he recommended I talk to a lawyer first. It was kind of charming right? This guy is so worried because I had nothing that he wanted to make sure I knew what I was getting into getting married for the first time. And it wasn't even to do a prenup. Never made me sign one of those because he thought I'd be too scared to ever leave him. Anyway, so I found this lawyer who met with me pro bono because I didn't want to use Sid's money for it right? And so we sat down and we talked, off and on for like weeks. And this guy straight up tells me not to change my last name right away because sometimes these things fall apart and it'd be harder on me later. He also told me to create an account in my name that was my own in case I had to run."

"An emergency fund?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah, I think I talked to you about that at one point. It was such a fascinating idea because I'd never had enough to actually create one. But I saw the need for it. Like in case you lose your job, or your partner is abusive, or just if shit goes south. So I did. And this guy was giving me such good caring advice. Talking to me about all this stuff I

didn't know that I straight up asked him if he wanted to be your godfather."

Johnny laughed.

"He told me that he was honored but to wait. Just like he told me to wait and maybe not let Sid adopt you, to keep sole custody. And so I met up with him from time to time and eventually he agreed. And then the manager at the carhop, she agreed too. And then when you started hanging out with Bobby and I met his parents and they talked about how much of a delight you were they also agreed. I nearly asked Mr. Miyagi," she said with a laugh. "No one told me to stop. I was so used to being alone that I didn't want you to be if anything happened. And your original godparents passed away when you were little so suddenly that I just thought more was better. I'm lucky they let that lawyer represent me for my divorce."

"Where did you stay?" Johnny asked softly.

"With the Browns. It was kind of sweet. All your friend's guardians offered for me to stay with them. Haven't had a lot of people fight over me before. It was kind of fun. But you were calling from Okinawa to Bobby's so I picked them. I ate so many sweets I thought I was either going to bounce off the walls or turn into sludge. They put me to work taste testing and the creative chaos of that house is so much fun. Every time I turned around I was being offered like a cookie or a cupcake or a tart, or like *could you try this?* Their kids, Bobby's little siblings would ask me if I could sneak them *vegetables*. I've never met such kids who run away from a cookie the way most run away from brussels sprouts. You always said they were cute. Always talked warmly about the Browns. And I get that. But they also talked warmly about *you* you know. It was very sweet. Said we are always welcome. Which all your friends and their families extended. It was... heartwarming. I cried a lot."

Johnny held out a hand to his mother, ice cream finished. She took it warmly and gave his hand a squeeze. "I also met your Abuela. You would've thought I'd have known your Abuela. Because that's how she introduced herself. Gave me a ton of tamales. Brought her granddaughter to translate."

"How'd you find her?" Johnny asked.

"Jimmy. He said there was a shop you asked him to help make everything cheaper. So he invited her. And she's such a sweetheart.

Said you did what I told you to, that if someone was bullying you to seek help. Run into a shop or somewhere with an adult. And that you were always trying to help her. But you always looked hungry so she always fed you. And that explains where all those tamales you'd bring home came from. So I got to finally thank her for that. So between her and Mr. Miyagi and the Browns, I didn't have to spend money on food for like three months," she said with a soft laugh. "She also said your boyfriend and you were very cute."

"She could tell?" Johnny asked blushing.

"Yeah, she dropped off tamales yesterday. Apparently, now that she knows where to find me I'm on her list of "not getting enough food" I think she thinks I'm starving still. I told her granddaughter I'm fine and she laughed and told me that her grandmother always feeds everyone and it's just how she is. You get used to it. And she told me you and Daniel were coming by frequently and were very sweet. She also mentioned that after you started Cobra Kai and had your growth spurt some guys were harassing her and you scared them all off. Got into a fight for her. She said she berated you for an hour, but mostly because she'd been scared to see you get hurt. Her granddaughter said you were very sweet. So did a small army worth of librarians, nurses, and teachers who showed up," she said smiling at him.

"Your friends said they always thought you just were trying to *seem* good to all the adults and thought it was weird, but all these adults talked about how you'd help out when you could. Carrying heavy things, organizing stuff, a quiet and helpful boy. I also got to meet the parents and kids you babysit who adore you and the people from the animal sanctuary. You went out and sought all these people to be a part of your life. And you created such strong bonds with all of them that I just had to mention that I was getting a divorce and was looking for people to talk about you and they all volunteered. My lawyer said he'd never seen so many random strangers pop up out of the woodwork like that. They even called Lucille and she talked to the judge over the phone. So I want you to realize something that I realized. Okay?"

She squeezed his hand gently turning to look at him.

"I know things have been bad and you had an especially rough year last year and you made some awful choices, and before that, you had a rough time. And I pried, wouldn't leave your friends alone. And I know you heaped all of everything onto yourself. Thought you deserved every damn thing that happened. Because of the shit Sid said

and the other kids at the other schools you went to. But you didn't deserve any of that. Ever. No excuses. But we don't ever realize how much what we say or do impacts the lives of other people. It can seem small to show up and help someone carry a heavy box somewhere or to help someone who's a little overworked with what they're doing, or just remembering things and asking about it when we see them. It has a ripple effect.

"You put all this good into the world without even knowing it and it came back in a fucking tsunami. And Sid put all this hell into the world and nothing came back from it. None of his staff spoke kindly about him. Either the people who worked for him in Hollywood or the people who worked in the house. The only people who even attempted were country club people who weren't sure if he'd win or not. You're not evil Johnny. You're just a kid. Kids make mistakes. And you took responsibility for the things that were truly your fault. Ali and Daniel are in your corner you know, despite everything, and because of everything. Because of the work you put in. Just like there are all these other people."

She lifted her hand and brushed the hair from his eyes where it was getting longer and tucked some behind his ear, cupping his face.

"It's not just me and you. And it might take you a while to realize it fully. To see the whole implications of it. But believe me, I've seen it and it's awe-inspiring. I think you won't fully see it until you get married, when I make you invite all these people and see when they show up to celebrate you and your happiness, but you'll see it someday. And that it's okay Johnny to just be. You don't have to make a big plan for your life. You can just be. Because whatever you are doing is going well. And I've got your back okay? Talk to me about what you want to do, if there are things you want to try and I'll help. Let me help. Let me be there. Let me be the mom. Let me finally get a chance to spoil you like I always wanted to."

She brushed tears from her eyes and sighed flopping back in the sand. "Do you want to continue to live with Mr. Miyagi?"

"If that's okay?" Johnny asked softly.

She laughed.

"Well, I want to have dinners. Once a week? Twice a week? Should we get lunch? Fit me into your schedule. I'm going to get an apartment or something, so call me. Maybe I'll get a condo. Or a house. A smaller

more manageable one. I don't know yet, but I'll let you know when I do. You can stay with me when you want. In a week or so we'll go to the mansion and clear out our stuff."

"In a week?"

"Yup. I'll let everyone know. I gotta wait till Sid's people finish what they've got to do. And then we gotta decide what we're doing for your 18th birthday. What do you want to do?"

"I don't know,"

She smiled. "Well let me know before I order a clown or something."

Johnny wrinkled his nose with a frown.

She laughed. "No clown got it."

Johnny looked at her.

He didn't think she'd ever get a divorce. It hadn't ever seemed like a possibility.

He knew when Sid and his mother had started dating he'd seemed so kind, so nice, so caring. And then they got married and it all came crashing down.

For him to be gone. For his mother to remove him, clean out the space like a cavity while Johnny was in Okinawa, while he was going out hiking with Daniel, and little dates that were so simple but so nice to just relax.

She'd picked herself **and** him over Sid. Gone to war in her finest clothes.

It was like a shadow on his life was gone and he almost didn't believe it.

It felt like a dream. A good one. One where they were finally free and on steady ground.

Everything Must Go

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daniel was nervous.

He knew Mrs. Lawrence was telling Johnny *now*. He wondered if he needed to stop referring to her mentally as Mrs. or if now it was Ms.?

Could he jump the gun and go with Laura?

No that seemed too presumptuous.

He was working hard making manicotti from scratch.

The guys were sitting with Mr. Miyagi asking him about bonsai. Sneakily trying to get more information out of him about his dream.

Daniel was pretty sure he wanted to make spinach manicotti.

It'd be nice. He just wasn't sure if Johnny would be joining them. Or Ms. Lawrence.

It seemed like a night to celebrate and manicotti was more of comfort food for him. Not really celebratory. But the guys needed a pick me up and he wanted to do giant stuffed noodles.

He wanted to see Johnny. Wanted to kiss him. Wanted to go on a date. He'd been spoiled by getting to go on dates for nearly two weeks. Then today it stopped.

When they got home he'd showed the guys all the paperwork the relator had given him and Jimmy had looked it over and answered all his questions.

Daniel had been worried that Jimmy would be too burnt out, but he laughed and had said that this wasn't as emotionally draining so he was happy to talk about zoning laws.

Dutch had whined that it was so damn boring. Told them he was going to take a nap and to wake him up when they got to something interesting. He fell asleep immediately. He was still asleep on the floor near the table.

When Daniel was plating the food he heard the front door open.

"Something smells divine," Ms. Lawrence said.

"Daniel must be cooking," Johnny said and Daniel grinned.

He made two more plates and set them out on the table.

Tommy woke up Dutch who sat up fast, half of his face red.

"How can you tell?" Ms. Lawrence asked.

"Different smells. Mr. Miyagi cooks mostly Japanese food, its different oils, and seasoning. Italian usually means Daniel."

Daniel could hear Johnny explaining as they were getting closer.

"That's adorable," Bobby said with a laugh.

Johnny stiffened in the doorframe, looking shocked that they were all there, but his mother pushed him forward towards the table, saying hello to Mr. Miyagi and the guys. They chatted warmly and Daniel sat down next to Johnny who took his hand and gave him a gentle kiss on the lips.

"Oh no, they're getting too used to us being around," Tommy said.

"Yeah they're just forgetting about PDA now," Bobby said.

"Johnny your Mom and Mr. Miyagi are right there, come on man," Jimmy said teasingly.

"If this is you behaving around adults we're going to have to start knocking," Dutch said.

Daniel caught Johnny picking up his glass in a very specific way to sneakily flip them off, which just made them laugh.

Ms. Lawrence started eating and then paused turning towards them and Daniel felt panic flood his veins.

Oh, what if she hated spinach?

Or his cooking?

Was it not as good as his mom's?

"Johnny he can *cook*," she said slowly. "You're going to have to hurry up and marry him. You just have to move to West Hollywood."

Johnny turned bright red and she burst out laughing.

"Why West Hollywood? That's super close," Bobby said.

"They've got a domestic partnership registry for everyone, started in February," Dutch said.

"Bingo!" Laura said warmly.

Bobby and the guys turned to Dutch eyes wide.

"How the hell do you know that?"

"I *know* shit," Dutch said holding out his arm in front of Bobby expectantly.

Bobby sighed digging out the stickers.

"Fine, only because I'm impressed," he said sticking one on Dutch's arm.

"Mom," Johnny said.

"I want a son-in-law to cook for me," Ms. Lawrence complained. "Plus that'd make Lucille family."

"*Mom*!"

"Okay okay," she leaned forward to look at Daniel and smiled warmly, "It's delicious Daniel, as good as your Mom's cooking. You're definitely a catch."

Daniel grinned pleased. "I can still cook for you," he said.

"Oh, that's dangerous. Don't promise me that, I'll take advantage," she said with a laugh.

Daniel smiled warmly and put his hand on Johnny's thigh and gave a little squeeze.

Johnny jumped a little, still bright red.

They both looked okay.

He'd been worried. He shouldn't have been.

It was like they'd cleared out all the bad stuff so they could start new.

Now one was gone. There was just Kreese. But she was working on that too, with Jimmy. They only had to wait.

The week passed by quickly with the guys over more frequently than he expected, dragging them out of the house. Away from what Daniel had hoped for alone to go on dates. They wanted to catch up on their original plans to go to the national parks and drive around. A moment of pleasant summer before school started back up. He couldn't be too mad. They'd given up the majority of their summer for Johnny and Ms. Lawrence and for himself and Mr. Miyagi.

They'd also gone with him back to the realtor who looked a little stunned to see two boys return with four more boys crowding in her office. Three of which spoke adamantly about all the things she had questions about. Before Daniel knew it they were looking at shops and locations, all her worries and reservations transforming into excitement over the project and talking with the guys about shops and real estate.

There was a big run-down shop next to a railroad track that said oranges and lemons with an orange painted on it.

Daniel thought it had a lot of potential, that it was charming.

Dutch hated it. Said it was too close to the tracks. Hated the spiderwebs.

He walked into a big one as soon as they stepped in and let out a string of curses.

Jimmy said it looked like an old fruit packaging factory and learned Mr. Miyagi could keep all the stuff in it which only felt like another plus to Daniel.

Tommy frowned but didn't say anything, just running a finger through the dust.

Bobby checked the wood and the structure with the air of an inspector.

Johnny just quietly leaned over and said, "I used to live around here."

It was loud enough that it caught everyone's attention, only because it was so quiet in the room.

He'd tried to be quiet but all eyes turned to him including the agent who turned on her heels back to him.

"When did you live here?" she asked interest piqued.

"Oh, uh, I think ten years ago?"

"Well, it's very up and coming. Lots of young artists are moving in. There's even a ceramic studio across the street that's been doing well."

"Yeah?" he said.

Daniel couldn't tell whether that meant it was a good area or not. But she had so many others to look at so they kept going.

The other shops that Daniel looked at didn't have the same type of personality.

They were also out of his price range.

After the twelfth shop that was downtown or near the Sunset Strip that the *guys liked* Daniel pulled Johnny aside while they were talking about what was in style with the agent and what wasn't and foot traffic.

"You think that one near the ceramics shop is safe?"

"Safe?"

"The area?"

"Yeah. It's safe."

"I like that one the best. What do you think?"

"I think it'll be nice. Just needs a little elbow grease."

Daniel smiled and when they waved the guys goodbye because they had dinner with their families, he turned to the agent and got the ball rolling.

At the end of the week, Johnny packed an overnight bag and so did Daniel. It felt weird that Johnny was packing one but Daniel understood that there was no knowing what they'd find.

Ms. Lawrence wanted Johnny to spend the night at the mansion, she'd given an open invite for anyone else who wanted to come.

Daniel had jumped at the offer.

He knew with all the memories it was probably awful. *But it was a mansion.*

And if he went he could share a bed with Johnny far far away from anyone else, far away from Mr. Miyagi. And it'd be Johnny's bed. A fancy expensive bed. It'd be luxurious and wonderful and maybe they could swim in the pool.

His hopes were dashed when the guys showed up at Mr. Miyagi's. Meeting them at the door. Johnny was holding his bonsai in his arms like a kid who needed a nightlight staying somewhere dark and scary. Maybe Daniel could scare all that fear away.

They wished Mr. Miyagi a good evening passing Bobby who popped his head in.

"Mr. Miyagi we got you something."

"For Miyagi?"

"Yes. We've kept your place pretty loud since you got back. We assumed you'd enjoy some peace and quiet. But worried you might get lonely," Bobby said handing over an envelope.

"It's an international phone card Mr. Miyagi," Jimmy said.

"So you can call Ms. Yukie," Tommy said warmly.

"Yeah we got the max amount of hours, you can talk for like a whole week non-stop with that thing," Dutch said.

"Oh, thank you boys," Mr. Miyagi said warmly.

"Bye Mr. Miyagi!"

Johnny drove the Avanti to the mansion.

Daniel watched him.

Johnny had the bonsai in his lap like it was keeping him grounded.

Johnny parked in the garage, somewhere Daniel had never been.

The guys following parking their cars.

Dutch let out a whistle.

"Damn look at all these cars."

Maybe they hadn't ever been in there either. Which seemed weird after all their years of friendship. But the mansion seemed to be a weird location. He remembered the staff who'd answered the door.

Daniel thought Mr. Miyagi had a lot of cars, but these weren't all classics, these were the expensive cars that only rich people owned.

The kinds of cars that Louie talked about in a hushed whisper when they went through car magazines at the nearest bodega.

Johnny's Avanti almost looked humble next to them all. The door to the garage opened and Ms. Lawrence leaned against it.

"Welcome boys," she said with a grin. "Sid's people are done with all their work. Anything he got to keep is gone."

"So he didn't get to keep all these cars?" Jimmy asked in awe.

"Nope, those are technically mine now," she said with a shrug turning.

"I already set aside anything I actually wanted, so you see something you want, mark it with a sticky note. Movers come in the morning. And then the true fun begins."

Daniel wonders if she decided to take Tommy's idea of a divorce party to heart.

It might be fun.

She handed them each a different color of sticky notes and waved her hand.

Johnny beelined straight for his room, pushing open the door with a frown. Like he hadn't expected the door to be open and suddenly was

worried that there might be something in his room he didn't want there.

A monster of some kind.

Bobby walked ahead of him.

"It's fine," he called.

Johnny set his things down, put the bonsai on the desk.

Bobby was holding an envelope and reading.

"What's that?" Johnny asked.

Bobby turned so Johnny couldn't read over his shoulder and then let out a laugh.

"What?"

"Sid left you a note."

"Oh," Johnny said all interest dying immediately.

Daniel set his things down.

"It's not worth a read, *but* I'm kind of surprised," Bobby said.

"Why, what's it say?" Jimmy asked stepping forward.

"It should be burned, *but* he did say," Bobby cleared his throat. "If I had known that Dutch was of *The* Dutch's *and* you liked guys I would've had you break up with Ali earlier and date Dutch instead. You should rethink your relationships. That one is actually worth pursuing if that's the way you swing. You'd be set for life. Then there's some more garbage, but essentially if he could redo anything, which like no remorse because he's a monster, the only remorse is that he didn't realize Dutch was *a Dutch* and that he tried to get you to marry Ali when he should've tried to get you to marry Dutch," Bobby said before bursting out laughing.

"Let me see that," Dutch said snatching the paper from Bobby who was doubled over in his fit of laughter.

"He hates us all but Dutch, man, he approves of fucking Dutch of all people now."

"I don't know whether to be honored or offended," Dutch said wrinkling his nose.

"Hey man you said yourself Johnny's a catch," Tommy said with a grin.

"Yeah, but this is *Sid*, it's not compatibility because he doesn't even fucking know me. It's just that he knows of my parents. Their notoriety. He's regretting not brown-nosing while he could. Not realizing my parents hate Sid with a burning passion and anyone like him."

"So you're saying your parents wouldn't have approved if you brought Johnny home?" Jimmy teased.

"No, they like Johnny, that wouldn't have been a problem. It all would've been Sid." Dutch said sourly.

"Wait, okay now I gotta know. What's that game, fuck marry kill? Johnny, pick."

"No," Johnny said walking out of the room.

"Johnny come on," they called following after him down the hall.

"I wouldn't want any of you to die," Johnny said heading down the hall and throwing open a door.

"Damn, okay well, the other two then."

"Daniel wins," Johnny said.

"Daniel doesn't count you're already dating him. This is a hypothetical."

"Dutch you're the one who Sid was planning to marry Johnny off to if he could go back in time, who'd you marry? If you had to pick one of us."

"Johnny," Dutch said with a shrug. "Parents already like him."

"Okay Jimmy, how about you?"

"Tommy. He plans a lot of shit, I figure we'd create some super couple." Jimmy said with a shrug.

Daniel tuned out the chatter. He'd gotten the answer he'd wanted to

hear and it looked like Johnny wasn't going to say anything else. There were more interesting things to focus on. Like taking in the rest of the mansion.

The room they were in was a library. The guys burst out into a fit of laughter over their conversation and Daniel walked up to Johnny who was staring at the bookcase studying the books.

He hooked his arm through Johnny's.

"You okay?" he asked softly.

Johnny looked down at him. "Uneasy. I keep expecting someone to come to yell at me, around any corner. But the staff is gone."

"Yeah."

"Damn are these first editions?" Bobby asked picking up a book.

"Probably," Johnny said.

"Johnny," Jimmy said throwing his arms around both their shoulders. "I forgot to tell you. Anything you need to store you can store at my place."

Bobby burst out laughing.

"What?" Jimmy asked with a frown.

"Your parents still jealous Ms. Lawrence stayed with us?" Bobby asked.

"Yes, but don't ever let them know I said that. They're very competitive. So the fact she picked you guys, even though it was *logical* made them offer up like half our guest rooms. *For storage.* Anyway, Johnny we've already got the LaRusso's stuff. My parents already offered it to your Mom. But like if there are things you want, grab them, and we'll put it in my house."

"Thank you," Johnny said.

He was looking up.

Then he glanced around.

He grabbed a ladder and leaned it against the shelf and climbed up.

He pulled a book from the shelf, leather-bound, and fancy-looking.

He passed it down to Daniel.

Pride and Prejudice

Daniel looked up at Johnny who smiled down at him warmly. He wanted the book **because**, Daniel realized, because of *him*, **them**, because of their study dates.

A room full of books and the guy only had eyes on one.

"Why don't you grab more?" Daniel asked as Johnny started to come back down.

"Mom's donating whatever I don't pick that she doesn't want. I can check out books from the library. This one though was one of the few that was gifted by a teacher I liked that, here look," Johnny opened the book gingerly. "He never touched it or read it."

"You said one of the *few*, why don't you grab those?"

Johnny nodded thoughtfully.

"Yeah, those are fine."

He put the book back in Daniel's hands and carried the ladder across the room, climbing up and grabbing another.

In the end, he only left with four books.

Daniel looked at them all and shook his head, he didn't even know where to start.

They walked from room to room.

Johnny didn't seem particularly interested in anything, except the kitchen where he opened the cabinets and grabbed a jar.

"Oh, we have a few of those at home," Dutch said. "What 'cha going to use it for?"

"Farmer Johnny? Going to make preserves?" Bommy asked.

"I could see that," Jimmy said.

"No," Johnny said and then after a moment. "Daniel made a list of date

ideas, I thought it might be fun to have a jar to put them in, so when we're free we can pick one at random."

Daniel had been looking at a pasta machine looked up surprised.

"That's a *Van Vliet. Y*ou're going to turn a $10,000 jar into a *date jar*?" Tommy asked eyes wide.

Johnny shrugged.

"The pencils are probably worth $1,000 each. Sid liked having worthless things worth a lot. So that if you broke a pencil or lost something he could complain about who expensive it was."

Daniel stuck one of his sticky notes on the pasta machine and a few other appliances he knew Mr. MIyagi didn't have.

A coffee maker for the shop.

For him mostly, since Mr. Miyagi didn't drink coffee.

That made things interesting.

What could he repurpose for the shop?

There was a thick heavy table that looked like it would work well in the shop with bonsai on it.

"Someone's focused," Tommy said amused.

"Oh, I just realized I could get all the stuff I need for Mr. Miyagi's shop for free."

"That's a great idea," Jimmy said.

"What kind of stuff are you thinking?" Johnny asked. "I'll help you find it."

"Office furniture for the office, a few things like towels and whatnot for the bathroom, mostly ways to display bonsai."

Johnny nodded taking his hand and turning, heading off down a hallway full of art.

Pedestals with vases and paintings and statues.

"Shit, I never went down this hallway," Dutch said.

"Think he'd like some vases?"

"Those are *Imperial Ming* Johnny!"

Johnny shrugged. "Sid broke like five of them on his own."

"Broke a Ming," Jimmy repeated hand to his chest. "Fucking bastard."

Daniel studied the pedestals and the shelving used for displays, picked out a few while the guys complained about mistreatment of art.

In the corner were two big vases with big plants in them, he ran his fingers through the leaves. They were real. He stuck his sticky notes on the vases.

"We should go to the gardener's workshop too," Johnny said before leading them out to the garden and a shed on the property when Daniel was done.

Daniel watched Johnny stop and turn towards a part of the garden and took one of his sticky notes and stuck it on a plant before rejoining them.

Daniel got supplies he thought Mr. Miyagi would find useful, found more fishing rods and fishing equipment, and marked that for Mr. Miyagi as well.

He found a desk, some chairs, a nice table they could use for checkout, a whole bunch of cleaning equipment, and a nice toolbox full of tools and power tools.

They stopped for lunch. Ms. Lawrence bringing them reheated tamales.

Daniel laughed as soon as he saw them.

"I need help. I'm drowning in these," she said.

They sat out in the garden by the pool eating.

Daniel was tired.

There was so much stuff.

He thought rich people had tended to go for minamalism. But Sid had so much stuff.

They'd only gone through like a fourth of it.

And he knew if he wasn't following Johnny he would've gotten lost.

It was a maze.

Johnny didn't grab much and it made sense but it felt like a waste.

Johnny only seemed to go for useful things, like tires that fit the Avanti from the garage and a few things he could use to keep the Avanti in tip-top condition.

But he ignored the other cars. He ignored all the art. He ignored most of the stuff in every room, in the lounges, in the game room, in the conservatory, in the offices, in the guest rooms.

They ordered a pizza for dinner and sat around in one of the smaller kitchens at a tiny table.

Tiny in comparison to everything else.

It felt more comfortable, less vast.

Johnny seemed more comfortable. He poured them soda and wine for his mother who asked about their finds.

The guys complained about all the mistreated art and she laughed.

"Whatever you don't pick gets donated," she said warmly.

"Where to?" Jimmy asked. "Your taxes are going to be wild this year."

She laughed.

"Art's going to a museum or to the embassies. There's are a couple of schools I want to donate books to, and a friend was telling me that prisons also need books donated, I thought that would be a good idea. Some of it's getting auctioned off for charity, like the cars." She shrugged. "I've got like fifteen people my lawyer put me in touch with that are helping me empty this place out. Like a closing sale. *Everything must go*."

They played a few card games in the game room before Daniel started yawning.

Johnny wished them all good night and Daniel hooked his arm through his following him up to his room.

Johnny showered and Daniel changed getting in the bed.

It smelled like Johnny.

It was kind of overwhelming.

Was that how Johnny felt in Daniel's bed? That everything was overwhelming.

He wanted to snoop the way he'd gotten to explore through the entire house.

But unlike Sid who'd gotten to grab all his personal things, this was all Johnny's and he hadn't had a chance to separate his stuff.

Daniel got out of the bed and looked at the posters on the walls.

There was a book on Johnny's desk about the language of flowers.

Daniel smiled sitting at his desk and opening it.

He flipped through idly.

Then sparked by curiosity and a warm memory he flicked to lavender.

Devotion.

No. Of course not.

He re-read it.

But the florist in Newark said Johnny *knew* the language of flowers.

That had been so long ago.

They'd only been friendly for less than a month at that point. They had *just* become friends.

Johnny gave everyone the same cookies.

But his Mom *hadn't* gotten a heart.

Would it be too forward to jump in the shower with Johnny?

Johnny was quiet, but if Daniel played close attention he spoke so damn loud.

Actions.

The book he wanted was the equivalent of grabbing a record of their song.

He turned walking through his hated home into shopping for Daniel.

For Mr. Miyagi's new shop.

Daniel just yawned and Johnny bid everyone else goodnight.

Daniel didn't feel tired anymore.

Heart pounding in his ears.

There was no doubt that Johnny liked Daniel. A lot. Maybe as much as Daniel liked Johnny. Maybe-

Daniel just needed to figure out how to just be as clear. Just as loud.

But first, he needed Johnny to get out of the damn shower as soon as possible before he opened the door to the bathroom and did something stupid. Like, be in too much of a hurry to even take off his own clothes.

Chapter End Notes

Recipe for Homemade Manicotti
Recipe for the spinach filling of the Manicotti
The jar Johnny picks out is actually worth $23,000 today, I guessed at inflation by playing with an inflation calculator but it was difficult to go in reverse for some reason.

Thank you Bringbackthesunset for telling me how to do links properly.

Onwards to Better Things

Johnny thought that if the guys hadn't come he wouldn't have done much in the house. He would've followed his mother around like a lost puppy or one of those ducklings. Or he would've just stayed in his room.

He caught himself walking as quietly as possible. He didn't mean to, he *knew* Sid wasn't there, that the staff had left.

His mom had said they'd all found new jobs in better places and she'd asked if they needed anything. She didn't blame them for being shitty because it was Sid. But she didn't want to keep them and made that clear, made Sid pay their severance and make sure they'd have enough to get them through till they landed on their feet.

He appreciated that but was mostly glad they weren't there.

He even parked the Avanti between two of Sid's nicer cars out of habit.

He was glad Daniel was there.

Watching him go through the house with the shop in mind helped. Gave Johnny something to focus on. A goal. Things he needed to do. So was helping the guys grab things that they liked or thought would be good gifts or useful for their dorms.

It was weird to be home and knowing it wasn't his home anymore. The weirdness of the word home, and how that really meant people he cared for. Where the guys were, where his mother was, where Daniel was. That was home.

Johnny finished his shower and was drying his hair when he opened the door and Daniel was right there, unexpected and sudden, grabbing the edges of the towel on the top of his head pulling him down and into a kiss, pulling him back with him towards the bed. It wasn't slow and lazy like a lot of their kisses had been lately, this was almost all tongue.

Daniel had been half asleep when Johnny had left to take a shower. He didn't know what had happened but Johnny wasn't going to complain. He liked kissing Daniel. Was pretty sure that was a given. That had to be clear as he leaned over Daniel who'd sat on the bed

and was pulling him down with him. Reaching out to catch himself so he didn't crush Daniel.

"I thought you were tired?" Johnny asked softly.

"Not as much anymore," Daniel said, moving back under the covers and tugging Johnny along as if Johnny needed any invitation. "I realized, I get to be alone with you in a big bed in a big quiet home."

The mansion didn't seem particularly exciting.

Mr. Miyagi's house was pretty quiet usually too.

They'd spent plenty of time alone there now. And Johnny wasn't so sure about being alone in the mansion. But Daniel was pushing him down in the middle of the bed and kissing him and Johnny was trying to remember if he'd locked the door or not but it was hard to focus with Daniel's tongue brushing against his because *that* was a million times more interesting.

The way Daniel was moving was different than usual. It was like the way he talked, never-ending, barely stopping for a breath, like he had urgent things to tell Johnny but could only do so in this way. And Johnny was enjoying trying to parse through it, trying to keep the conversation going and then suddenly it spluttered out into curses as the bed dipped.

"Which side are you sleeping on Daniel?" Bobby asked. "Pick a side and rollover."

Daniel's face went through about fifty different expressions before he buried his head in Johnny's neck with a deep frustrated sigh.

Johnny didn't think he'd ever heard so many colorful curses fall from Daniel's lips.

"I thought you two were going to bed, not going to bone," Dutch said plopping down on Johnny's other side. "Sneaky Daniel, very sneaky. You looked like you were going to pass out. Now we know you're full of lies and mischief."

"You know that's a good way to put that," Jimmy said. "I mean he definitely has that streak huh? I bet he was a class clown at his old school."

"*Why*?" Daniel asked eventually. It came out as a whine, a complaint.

There was annoyance underneath it but mostly frustration.

"This is where we sleep, thought you knew that. Didn't Ali tell you?"

"Aren't there like 50 guest rooms?" Daniel asked pushing himself up and flopping down beside Johnny looking like he was trying to think of grey areas in Mr. Miyagi's defense only karate.

"Yes, but it's *scary* Daniel. This house is creepy. So skootch close, we usually take the floor, but fuck that today."

"You are not all going to fit," Daniel said.

"You're going to have to just get super close to Johnny. Didn't seem a problem five seconds ago."

"I hate you all."

"We love you too."

Daniel continued to grumble but curled up next to Johnny wrapping an arm around his chest, kicking a leg over his waist, and pressing his cheek against Johnny's shoulder as he complained softly about privacy and normal people just walking away and not heading closer like they were some damn animal documentary filmmaker. What kind of weirdos? Why was it a packaged deal? Buy one get four free? What if you wanted to return four? Who could he even complain to? He'd get his revenge. Wait till they got girlfriends or married or whatever, and *he'd* drop by and they'd have to explain why there was an Italian from Jersey telling them to make space. See how they liked it then. When they were on the other side of it then. He was going to keep track of every single damn time this happened and he'd just do it right back. Wait until their dates were going well and then show up.

Johnny wrapped his arm around Daniel.

"You do realize there are four of them. You're going to exhaust yourself."

"How are you not upset?"

Johnny glanced at the guys who'd taken up the bed and laughed softly, "Because-"

"Don't say it's because they're our friends," Daniel complained.

"I was going to say because they wore me down. Like a pebble."

Daniel pressed his forehead against Johnny's chest with a groan.

"You got the rest of your life," Dutch said reaching out and ruffling Daniel's hair. Daniel swatted at his hand and Dutch laughed.

Johnny wondered if *he* could help. Ran his fingers up and down Daniel's arm.

"I thought only one of you usually was up here," Daniel complained, but he seemed to be relaxing. He looked tired again. Fight fading.

"We usually do because we don't want to wake him up. But Johnny's already awake," Tommy said.

Johnny lowered his head and kissed the top of Daniel's head before resting his head on the pillow again. He listened to the quiet mansion. No one else there. No staff. No Sid. He heard a sound moving through the half towards the room.

Slow.

Dragging.

Johnny sat up carefully. It was difficult with Daniel. The door opened. His mother took in the room, eyes wide, and then she doubled over laughing.

"Like peas in a pod," she said when she caught her breath before laughing again. She caught her breath and brushed tears from her eyes. "Oh this is one of those things, oh I know," she walked over towards the closet and opened it, dug around, opened a board in the ceiling, and pulled out a camera. She took a quick picture giggled again dropping the camera in her bag.

"Mom?" Johnny asked.

"Okay, okay, sorry, like I knew the guys slept over and it was like this, but I usually didn't see it. Ali complained all the time about it. But this is adorable," she walked over. "You've got a month left till your 18, and you get to stay with Mr. Miyagi, so pardon me Bobby," she leaned over and kissed the top of Johnny's forehead. "I'd tuck you in but it looks like the guys already made sure you're not going anywhere." she laughed again stepping back.

She was dressed for bed. It was like when he was little, t-shirt and shorts, the only thing worth anything was her silk eye mask that she

had over her hair.

"What's happening?" Johnny asked softly.

"Right, so I wasn't sure where everyone would be sleeping," she said turning and going back into the hall and dragging a mattress in.

"You're staying here too?" Johnny asked softly.

"Yup," she said plopping down. "This place is too big. Too echoy. And the bastard sprayed his cologne in like every room but yours."

"That's what that was," Jimmy said. "I thought it was weird that so many rooms had the same smell."

She laughed, "Like a skunk. Anyway, it's better to be here."

Johnny nodded. It had to be hard for her to be here. In the mansion at night. Her room had also been Sid's and he didn't blame her for not wanting to be there.

"You sure that's going to be okay?" Johnny asked. He wondered if he should kick them all out of his bed, give it to her. Daniel was already falling asleep, even just leaning against him as he sat up.

"Of course. I've slept worse places."

He knew that was true. They both had. Plus she slept easily. Just passed out at the drop of a hat. Usually after parties in the car. Kind of like how he could sleep on the beach.

He laid back down carefully, tired as she turned off the lights and flopped down on the mattress she'd dragged in, curling up under the blankets she'd brought with her, as the guys fell asleep around him.

Johnny woke up and for a moment the past several months felt like a dream as he took in his mansion room. But then he felt the arms around him, felt the weight of Daniel.

His mother was correct.

There was no escape.

But he could see the clock. Could hear movement in the house. He tried to see if his Mom was still sleeping on the mattress at the foot of

his bed.

The mattress was gone.

He glanced around.

Bobby was still asleep.

Daniel was still asleep.

Blocked on two angles. The others were gone. He wondered if he could scoot into the empty space now that there was some. He didn't want to wake either of them.

The bathroom door opened quietly and Dutch looked at him with a laugh in his eyes. A look of *good luck* before he walked off and out of the room.

Johnny looked up at the bonsai, hoping for some inspiration.

His arm was asleep.

He wiggled his fingers. It was all pins and needles.

He stared at the bonsai. Sending it an S.O.S.

The bonsai did not respond to his mental S.O.S.

Or at least couldn't help.

But eventually, Daniel started to stir.

He rolled over, seemed to realize suddenly there was so much empty space next to him, and flopped over.

Johnny sat up, suddenly free.

He wasn't sure if the bonsai had done it but he sent it silent thank you. He wondered if it'd be bad to leave Daniel and Bobby alone in his bed as he wiggled his fingers more trying to get the feeling back. He couldn't.

Who knew what sleepy Daniel would do. Bobby would freak or would tease him.

They'd murder him.

Daniel woke up with a frown, like having been unable to find Johnny the way he left him had confused him. He blinked around blearily, looking under him like he thought Johnny was there and couldn't figure out why he wasn't. Disappointed.

Johnny leaned over and kissed his cheek gently. Daniel grabbed the sides of his face kissing him on the lips.

Johnny pulled away and Daniel frowned.

Johnny turned.

"Bobby, we're going to go get breakfast, you want to keep sleeping?"

Bobby grabbed the blanket and pulled it over his head.

Johnny took that as it was okay to leave him alone in the bed and motioned at Daniel to get moving. He got out of the bed and Johnny moved to follow out the other side when Bobby's hand shot out and grabbed his wrist.

Johnny paused and turned back. It's just an arm sticking out from under a comforter, kind of like how the cats at the sanctuary would do.

Bobby didn't say anything so Johnny lifted up the comforter and looked at him.

"You okay?" they asked each other at the same time.

Johnny blinked in surprise and Bobby laughed.

"Did you actually sleep at all?" Bobby asked.

"Yeah. I've slept better for almost a month now."

Bobby nodded.

"You okay?" Johnny asked again.

"I'm sorry," Bobby said, his voice soft.

"For?"

"Not noticing earlier. About any of it. Kreese. Sid. For not telling you the call dropped."

Johnny caught Daniel moving out of the room, with a little motion for Johnny to stay and to not worry.

Johnny shifted back, laid down like the one time when they were younger and Bobby had broken down in tears because he'd forgotten to pick his siblings up from school and it'd been raining.

Johnny picked up the edge of the blanket and threw it over himself and rolled over onto his side looking at Bobby.

"Sid wasn't your responsibility," Johnny said. "And we didn't know Kreese was going to go that way."

"But-"

"No buts," Johnny said. "Promise me something."

"What?" Bobby asked.

"Don't beat yourself up over this. There are going to be moments where I get hurt that you can't protect me. Like are you going to get upset every time I get a papercut?" Johnny asked with a playful smile.

Bobby's brows furrowed. "That's what I told you in Okinawa. It's *different* Johnny."

"How? If you beat yourself up over it then don't you just damage yourself? You take on all the responsibility even when it's *not your job.* You already do more than your parents ask at home. You're not parent version two, you don't need to be my parent either. Or the guys. Just our friend. And you're already acing that. Have since day 1. Did you know you're the first person my age who ever came up to me to talk to me on their own? The only kids who were friendly to me were introduced to me by their parents because of Sid or were much older than me. You came over to me at Cobra Kai and introduced yourself and invited me to hang out. Asked if I wanted to be friends. Thank god Kreese didn't overhear," Johnny said with a soft laugh. "You're not just my best friend, you're my first friend."

"That is so fucking sad man," Bobby said burying his face in the bed.

"I don't think of it that way. I feel like I got a chance to filter past all the bull shit people to make a lifelong friend. I got to make real connections. Yeah, it's a bummer, but I'm happy now. I mean even Daniel is aware you guys are going to be around for a long time. That this isn't one of those friendships that fades. I'm planning to drop by

the college to visit you, your church wherever you end up, to sit and have talks with you."

"Just don't interrupt my sermons drunk," Bobby muttered.

Johnny laughed. "That might be more of a Dutch problem. Bobby, you're not a pastor or whatever you want to be yet. You don't have to try and fix people or take care of them yet. All I needed was a friend and you aced that job."

Bobby sniffed brushing tears from his eyes. "You're really happy?"

"You and the guys helped my Mom vanquish Sid. I didn't even think that was possible. And you all tried really hard to help me get a date with Daniel."

Bobby laughed. "We custom-made you like 50 dates."

"Do those count?"

"Oh poor Daniel," Bobby said amused.

"The point is, almost all good in my life comes from the moment you shook my hand and said "Hi, I'm Bobby Brown. I hope you like Cobra Kai. Let's be friends."

"Was that what I said?" Bobby laughed. "How uncool."

"Yeah what would you have said differently? I liked it. Straight to the point."

"Cobra Kai fucking sucks, let's grab these three other idiots and run before the bastard who runs this place absolutely destroys our ability to tell right from wrong, or at least tries. Let's just hang out at the ice cream shop instead and see if we can find a different dojo."

"You didn't introduce yourself in that one, why would I go with you?" Johnny said amused.

Bobby sighed. "*Picky*."

"Very picky because I know how to pick out the best and how to keep the best."

"Oh god, please tell me that's not how you flirt with Daniel because that poor boy."

"*Hey*. I can flirt. Why should I listen to *you* about flirting advice?"

"Johnny, you know I visited UCLA this summer, right? And that there was a group of girls waiting to welcome me right? They even made me a sign."

"Wait, you did not mention that, the party girls?"

"I wouldn't say it that way, but yes."

"What's that got to-"

"I am *master class* at flirting Johnny."

"Oh good to know your *ego* isn't damaged."

"It's just a fact. What you don't know is while I was visiting them I got *more* numbers."

"Are you really master class? I mean I've been dating Daniel for a month how long have you been dating...have you even been dating? How does one actually pull off dating a group of girls?"

"I'm having fun."

"You're going to be the cool preacher huh? The one who partied in school."

"Of course. I'm also going to be the pastor who can kick ass."

Johnny smiled. "You are."

Bobby sighed and pushed himself up, pushing the comforter aside. He turned back and looked at Johnny.

"Thanks," they said at the same time.

Johnny laughed and Bobby smiled, getting up and heading towards the door.

Johnny sat in his room for a moment.

Alone.

The first time he'd seen it he'd been so excited he'd given Sid a hug. It was *huge* compared to the car, he hadn't had a bed in ages, and everything was bigger than he'd ever had before, and Sid had made all

sorts of promises. Had laughed and told him yes, *it was all his*. That boys need their own space.

It'd been so fun in the daytime and then it'd been too scary at night. He'd gotten used to smaller spaces with his mom. Her asleep upfront, him asleep in the back of her old car. Always within reach.

He'd thought of going to find her. But he was scared of getting lost. So he'd stayed put and listened to his music, he read the book on flowers. Over and over and over again until he memorized it. Until he got used to the sounds of the staff walking through the halls, the vast darkness of the room. And now it'd be over.

He picked up the bonsai and sat back down on the bed.

"What do I do now?" he asked.

He studied it closely.

He'd spent one of his evenings, while Mr. Miyagi had cooked and Daniel had called his mother, trying to coax the tree back to the way it'd been before he'd left for Okinawa. But now he was thinking of changing it.

Letting it grow a little and changing the design.

Something new.

"I guess I start with breakfast hmm?"

He set the bonsai back on his desk while he got ready.

He returned then to get it and carried it out of the room.

It felt weird to carry the bonsai openly through the mansion.

He normally tried to hide it in his bag. But it was fine he reminded himself.

Everyone was in the kitchen.

Daniel was making pancakes.

"I was walking around...Johnny did you put a note on the fuchsia?" Laura asked pouring him juice looking at him with a smile.

She was wearing overalls and a t-shirt, boots and her hair was up in a

ponytail.

"Yes, I uh, I planted that."

"They've been lovely. I'll make sure they get dug up and set aside," Laura said walking out towards the kitchen doors in the garden. She leaned against the door. "Set the fuchsia in the red Avanti will you?"

"Yes ma'am!" came a chorus of voices and Johnny jumped, startled.

"Mom?"

"There's a lot to get done today. After breakfast, you boys should pack up your room. The rest of the house is being taken care of. They got here early this morning and went to work. Your things are being put in your car or into mine. The guy's stuff is being put in Dutch's van or driven to Jimmy's. The stuff from your room will also be driven to Jimmy's. But I'd rather you all pack up your room."

Daniel turned and set pancakes down in front of Johnny and smiled warmly at him.

Johnny reached out and grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

Tommy took the spatula out of Daniel's other hand and patted him on the shoulder, taking over at the stove.

Daniel sat down next to Johnny.

"They worked really fast and quietly," Daniel said. "I walked around a little bit. The library we walked through? *Empty*. Your mom got up at like the crack of dawn."

Laura walked over with a smile and kissed the top of Johnny's head.

"I've got some supervising to do, when your room is empty meet me outside okay? Tommy, when breakfast is over just shout out the window or something okay?"

"Yes, Ms. Lawrence."

Johnny ate his pancakes. They were chocolate chip and Daniel was talking about all the stuff that he'd seen. The guys adding that they'd never seen a house emptied out so fast. The garden was unplanted even.

"It's like your mother found a loose thread and unraveling the whole

place," Jimmy said.

Johnny nodded thoughtfully.

They finished breakfast and returned to his room where his things were packed up.

Daniel flitting around the room like he was trying to do everything. Like he *wanted* to do everything. Packing up every drawer, digging around in his closet, checking the little space in his closet ceiling that he hadn't touched since they'd moved in, pulling out some of his things Johnny had forgotten were up there, things from the previous apartment.

It all went into boxes and which were passed to workers who were standing by to carry things off.

Eventually, Johnny just had his bag and his bonsai.

The room was completely empty.

Bed gone, posters gone, closet empty, even the box of leftover Cobra Kai things. His trophies and medals. Whisked away.

Dutch's hand came down on his shoulder and leaned against him.

"It's weird man. But it's good."

"Yeah," Johnny said looking around. "Echo-y."

"You know we're getting pretty good at this," Bobby said.

"Let's not make a habit of this though," Jimmy said quickly. "I'm tired of packing up everyone's lives into boxes. No one else is allowed to move."

"Aren't you all going to college in a couple of weeks?" Daniel asked.

"Fuucccckkkkkk," JImmy said rubbing his face. "Man I don't want to pack up my *own* shit."

"I forgot," Tommy said softly. "I should've started already."

"Great job Daniel," Dutch said with a laugh. "You've started the panic and new school anxiety."

"Sorry, I didn't realize that was a touchy subject."

"We'll be okay," Bobby said. "You'll just have to come and help us."

They walked out of the room.

Johnny shifting the bonsai in his arms and taking Daniel's hand in the other as they walked out to the front of the mansion, down the steps Johnny rarely took, only ever running.

Johnny saw his Avanti had been moved as well as the guy's cars out to the street past the gates and far away from the mansion.

His mother was grinning talking to a man. He looked amused nodding.

Johnny walked over with the guys and she smiled brightly.

"Everything is ready ma'am," a man called from somewhere further away.

"Come with me," she said motioning for them to follow.

There was an umbrella set out and a table with chairs.

Johnny sat down next to his mother and Daniel facing the mansion.

A worker came over with a folder that they set down on the table for Laura and she read it over, nodding as she did and signed at the bottom with a big flourish.

She was poured a glass of champagne and she held it up in a cheers.

They were far away.

It didn't look like a party to Johnny. But his mother looked excited. And then he *heard* it.

He'd only heard a similar sound when dropping off Mr. Miyagi and Daniel at Seven Seas weeks ago. But that had been a *slower* sound.

Glass was breaking.

Everything was breaking and before Johnny's eyes, the mansion was falling apart.

Construction equipment was digging through it from the other side, knocking it down.

It wasn't quiet. But they were far enough away that it wasn't painful.

Laura leaned over towards Johnny, not taking her eyes off of the crumbling mansion.

"I asked if *I* could do it, but I learned it's best to let the professionals do it. Also wanted to see if I could use explosives, but with California's penchant for wildfires I got a hard no for that one."

"I thought you were going to *sell it*," Tommy said eyes wide.

"The land yes, the house no. No one else should have to set foot in that monstrosity."

"The land is technically worth more," Jimmy said softly.

"This is fucking cool as hell Ms. Lawrence," Dutch said looking absolutely delighted.

Laura smiled. She gently squeezed Johnny's hand.

"You know that animal sanctuary you work with sometimes?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, they put me in touch with some of their friends. They're wanting to start their own not-for-profit, so they're going to figure something out using the land."

"What about you?" Johnny asked, "Where are you going to go?"

"Not far, I've found a smaller house with a nice yard. Closed on it a couple of days ago. Just wanted to get my stuff set up first. And then you can come to visit, we can have dinners and do some gardening. You'll have a room for any time you want to stay with me."

"Do you want to plant the fuchsia there?" Johnny asked.

"That's yours though," Laura said tearing her gaze away from the rubble.

"I want it to be with you," Johnny said.

She smiled leaning over and kissing his temple. "Okay, I'll plant it in the garden somewhere nice. You'll have to come by and help me figure out what else I should plant. And we'll do dinners, as soon as it's set up."

"I'd like that," Johnny said smiling at her.

Laura turned to raise her glass one more time with a grin as the last bits of the structure collapsed. "Onwards to better things!"

Friends Near and Far

Daniel walked around the mansion by himself.

Bobby had looked so upset that he thought Johnny and Bobby needed time to talk.

He understood that. And *hopefully* Bobby would remember the next time Daniel tried to have alone time with Johnny.

The library was empty. He stared for a couple of moments remembering how full it'd been just the day before.

He'd wanted to look again, just to see what someone else did with a library.

Johnny hadn't liked this one so he wanted to look and find another style, but it was like when he'd walked into his apartment and found everything gone. That same sudden ghostly feeling. Empty and echoey.

He checked other rooms.

Every room was empty.

Nothing to be found.

He heard sounds and followed them to a kitchen, a small one where Ms. Lawrence was drinking coffee and talking to Jimmy, Tommy, and Dutch.

She tilted her head at Daniel looking for Johnny at his side. Raising an eyebrow when she realized he was alone.

"I thought you two were attached at the hip," she said with a warm teasing smile.

"Not yet," Daniel heard Dutch say with a smile.

Tommy hit him.

"We're currently debating breakfast," Ms. Lawrence said.

"All I do are eggs and bacon," Dutch said. "Haven't gotten to master anything above that yet."

Daniel looked around the kitchen, opening drawers and cabinets.

"You have enough to make pancakes," he said after he checked the fridge.

"Ohh, let's do chocolate chip," she said with a smile.

Daniel nodded gathering ingredients and getting to work.

It was nice to keep busy and not wonder *how* the house had emptied out so quickly in the night.

Ms. Lawrence didn't seem upset about it, or worried.

She had to have noticed that there seemed to only be two rooms with anything left in them.

Johnny's and the kitchen they stood in. It felt like that scene in Alice where the little brush creature erased all of the road but the part you were on. As soon as they all left he had a feeling the kitchen would also disappear. He worried for a moment while he cooked that maybe taking his eyes off of Johnny in such a time and place was bad. Like Johnny too could just disappear. But the kitchen was too warm, too sweet, and eventually, Johnny and Bobby came down joining them and he was relieved.

Whatever was happening would be over soon and Daniel couldn't wait.

After breakfast, they emptied out Johnny's room. Daniel got his hands on the red jacket and quietly asked Bobby to make sure that ended up at Mr. Miyagi's.

He looked at the trophies, two All-Valley, and a few others from tournaments he didn't know of.

Perfect attendance records for three years in a row.

A few books.

Lots of nice suits and clothes.

Daniel expected Johnny to have *more* stuff.

The cassettes he wanted to go through, but there didn't feel like there was enough time.

He dug around in the space above the closet that Ms. Lawrence had pulled the camera out of and found a couple of boxes.

Johnny said to just put it with everything else even though Daniel wanted to open them, to look in.

He'd hoped there would be so much else to dig around through. He'd wanted to be like an archeologist on a dig. Searching for the little things that made up Johnny.

But Daniel felt like his own room was so much more telling.

But this was...sad. He remembered Johnny saying how his surfboard broke. Had there been more stuff in there over the years and it just kept breaking? Sid kept taking anything away that Johnny liked and Johnny just gave up on collecting things?

He had more stuff in their room at Mr. Miyagi's. Johnny didn't even have any magazines.

Dutch laughed. "Seriously man? You've barely got anything. This is the easiest move we've done this summer."

"Yeah Daniel's room took like 3 days to pack up," Jimmy said. "That was just his room."

Johnny just shrugged picking up his bonsai and holding it to his chest.

"What about your bike?" Daniel asked.

"I left that at Jimmy's...last semester?" Johnny asked.

"Yup, it's in our garage."

"It was safer there," Johnny said.

Daniel held the box he was using to pack up Johnny's desk that was so bland and boring that he wanted to drop it to the floor and hug Johnny, but Tommy beat him to it.

"Well your new places can be filled with stuff," Tommy said.

"I really don't need much," Johnny said. "But thanks."

A lot of Johnny's stuff went to Jimmy's place with the promise it'd be

moved into his room at his Mom's new home when she got set up.

She seemed so excited, following them to their cars to see them off holding her champagne in one hand, her other hand in her pocket, looking so at ease.

The rubble of the mansion behind her, workers taking it apart like ants to carry off pieces that could be reused elsewhere.

Johnny promised to come home for dinners, to the new place and Daniel wanted to see what kind of house Ms. Lawrence would create.

The mansion was all Sid from the looks of it. All gaudy and extravagant in unnecessary ways.

She promised a housewarming party that could double as a divorce party and Daniel thought that sounded like fun. A good way to celebrate the end of an awful chapter.

He sat in the Avanti as she walked over to the driver's side, leaning over to give Johnny a hug and kiss the top of his head. A promise to see each other again soon.

When they got home the phone was ringing and Daniel took off in a run to get it. He watched Johnny carefully carry his few things to their room listening as the agent told him his bid for the property by the train tracks and the pottery shop was cleared. She congratulated him and told him to come by to sign the paperwork at his earliest convenience next week.

He thanked her warmly and took off towards their room, throwing his arms around Johnny telling him the good news.

"Congratulations!" Johnny said catching him, hands thankfully free.

"I just have to pick up the paperwork sometime next week. And then I can tell Mr. Miyagi."

"How are you going to tell him?" Johnny asked.

"I'm thinking I might make a joke. Tell him I graduated early, present it as a diploma."

Johnny laughed. "Cute."

"Cute? I'm going for tongue in cheek. A way to kill two birds with one stone, which maybe I need another idiom that isn't violent. Mr. Miyagi

would not approve of that one huh? But I want to find a way to soften the blow that I'm not going to college. Because that money he gave me for betting on me and winning in Okinawa was for school and like I tried to give him the money back to pay for his dreams. Because like yeah I broke the ice, but Mr. Miyagi taught me what I needed to know to do it, and he's the one who put money where my mouth wouldn't stop running. And I get that that was stupid, but like he was doing it wrong, don't you have to tell people when they're doing it wrong if they could hurt themselves right? He could've turned to me and been like, *okay so how should I be doing it?* But instead, it just pissed him off. My own fault. I know. *I know*. But I want to give some of it back. And I'll have enough money to pay for rent for a couple of months and with everything I don't have to buy now, it'll be much easier to set it up for him. I mean I kind of hope he'll let me work there you know. That'd be nice. Assisting with customers. Talking about bonsai. Answering the phone. Much more fun than sitting in a classroom. I'd get to *talk* to people. *This* would be my classroom. So like *Hey Mr. Miyagi didn't actually go to school, bought you a shop for your dreams instead, don't be mad*. I'll workshop that. Come up with something better. I just hope he can see its charm and potential you know? That he gives this retirement dream a-" Daniel paused and laughed softly, "college try."

Daniel was excited. *That*, even was an understatement. *Ecstatic*. He had a good feeling about the shop. About Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees. He had so many plans and ideas. Where he wanted things to go, how he envisioned the shop. But it wasn't his. It was Mr. Miyagi's. But he wanted to help. Whatever Mr. Miyagi needed. The man had been through so much he deserved a chance to live out his dream.

The rest of July slipped past Daniel. He got the paperwork from the agent, helped the guys pack for college which was hectic. But it was kind of nice to just work and not think. To see what they thought was important to go with them. What they floundered about.

Bobby had a list. Things the girls had told him to pack that were useful to take. His siblings wandered in and out fluctuating between upset and curious. They had a million questions about college. They were mad he was leaving them. Sad he was leaving.

He kept answering their questions, patient. Every once in a while when they'd end up in the way Dutch would just scoop them up, one under each arm, and they'd shout and giggle in delight and he'd carry them off dumping them off somewhere else in the house before running back and shutting the door.

It was clearly a game, as they'd come back and it'd start over again.

"You're just trying to get out of work," Jimmy complained with a sigh.

"If anyone should it should be me," Dutch said gathering them up in his arms again as they came giggling pushing the door open. "I mean I'm the only one who *isn't* moving this year. By the time all of you are in the dorms I'll have moved *everyone*. The LaRusso's, Mr. Miyagi, the Lawrence's, and you three," he said turning and walking down the hall.

"I hate to admit we've worked him to the bone this summer," Tommy said.

"It's good for him," Bobby said but he looked like he doubted it. He sighed, hands over the box he was working on and head down. "We are kind of leaving him behind. I mean Johnny's got Daniel and they have Mr. Miyagi. What is Dutch going to do?"

"Look at you all worried," Dutch said with a laugh.

Bobby looked up startled. "How did you-?"

"They said they wanted to go outside and play so I just dumped them outside the door this time," Dutch said with a shrug. "Don't worry about me. Taekwondo's been keeping me busy. My Sabomnim's talking about competitions, apparently, I'm better at it than I was at karate. So right now I'm studying Korean, because there's a chance to study in Seoul. My parents like it. They've got contacts there for work, so it's useful. I've got plenty to do. Plus I plan to visit you all and Johnny and Daniel aren't moving, so I can visit them and the shop if I get bored."

"Shit Dutch you didn't tell us it was going that well!" Jimmy said.

"We've been busy," Dutch said.

"You'll have to let us know when you have tournaments so we can come watch," Tommy said.

"Well of course, but bring babes will you? I want my cheer section to be hot, bring all the smart college chicks so they can watch me win and show off," Dutch said with a grin.

"You might be overestimating our collective abilities here, Bobby is an outlier," Jimmy said with a laugh. "I mean he might be able to get

your cheer section full, but I don't think it'll be the way you want it to be."

"We'll try," Tommy said. "It's the best you'll get."

"I'll take it. I don't think I'll meet too many babes just hanging around with Johnny and Daniel at this point. The last cool one they met is still overseas."

"Hey, you don't know that," Daniel said. "We're opening a shop, who knows the kind of people who'll become frequent customers."

"You know one of the things I like about you, Daniel?" Dutch asked tilting his head back to look at him.

"What?"

"Your optimism."

Getting all of the guys packed up was a feat and it was exhausting. But it was a relief when it was done. He could focus on other things, like the presentation of his gift for Mr. Miyagi.

Daniel decided to make a box for the paperwork. He talked with his old shop teacher who said he could come in over the summer and work on it. The teacher already had summer classes he was teaching so it wasn't like the high school was locked.

Daniel left early one morning towards the end of the month to put the box together. He was pretty proud of it.

When he came home Johnny was sitting with Mr. Miyagi.

Mr. Miyagi was drinking tea and Johnny was reading a piece of paper.

There were a lot of them, a whole stack in his hands.

"What are you reading?" Daniel asked after sneaking the box into his room and coming back.

"Ah, we get mail from Okinawa," Mr. Miyagi said.

"Really? Who's it from?"

"Chozen-san," Mr. Miyagi said.

"What!" Daniel asked louder than he meant.

He thought they'd left Chozen behind. Thought he'd never have to hear that name again.

If they were going to get mail from someone he'd expected Yukie or Kumiko. *Not Chozen*. And why was it so long? Was it a damn love letter? Daniel should be the one writing love letters. Not Chozen. Did Chozen not understand that Daniel and Johnny were dating?

Daniel thought he'd learned his lesson, but apparently not. Did Daniel have to go back and kick his ass again?

It sounded exhausting. He didn't even want to think about it.

Johnny glanced up.

"Not just Chozen. He collected updates from everyone and transcribed them. Kumiko's started her dance troupe in Tokyo. She's doing well. Rehearsals are almost over and her first show is in a couple of weeks. Sato's dojos are doing well and he's working on trying to restore the castle and got rid of some of the fishing boats to try and bring the fish back. He's included all the vegetables and fruit they planted and how they've been growing and the progress. Ichiro and Yuna are both doing well, they send their regards. Both want to know if we've been playing. Yukie also wrote a couple of pages which I haven't gotten to, there are about 6 pages in Okinawan for Mr. Miyagi. But she also wrote to us."

"That's it? He talked about vegetables but then collected for everyone else?" Daniel asked suspiciously sitting down next to him.

"Well, I'm not done reading yet."

"Johnny-san reading and summarizing," Mr. Miyagi said with a smile.

"We'll have to write them back," Johnny said. "Also Yuna sent us art, see?"

Daniel saw Johnny flip back through and show a picture of the village, drawn in a kid's crayons of a blonde boy sitting at the temple with a brunette next to him.

Daniel smiled warmly. Mr. Miyagi chuckled a little.

"What's funny?" Daniel asked.

"What's written," Mr. Miyagi said with a smile, pointing. "Yuna misspell, write *old married couple*."

Daniel looked closer at the writing, he couldn't read it, but he wanted to memorize it.

Daniel leaned against Johnny gently taking it from him. They'd have to stick it up somewhere. Frame it. It was very cute.

After a while Johnny flipped to the next page, reading again. "He listed everything he's working on. He wants to know what we've been up to. Promises to relay it to everyone else. Wishes us well. Wants us to write back soon and to visit again."

Daniel frowned leaning over. It said *you*. He wondered if it meant Johnny or both of them.

Daniel was going to assume Chozen meant Johnny but would act as if he meant both.

He'd write back after he told Mr. Miyagi about the shop. But Johnny could get started. Johnny had a lot happen so far since they'd gotten back. If that was something he wanted to share.

Johnny flipped to the next page, but instead of pages, it was photos.

Photos from their trip to the Aquarium.

Johnny and Daniel and Kumiko wandering around together, looking at everything. It was cute. They were lit in a blue glow. Johnny's eyes were so bright.

Daniel's arm was hooked through Johnny's in one, pointing at a fish he remembered he'd never seen before.

"Turn out nice," Mr. Miyagi said with a nod of approval.

"They did," Daniel said smiling. "I wonder how they were used."

"No one said," Johnny said flipping back through the letter.

Maybe getting mail from Chozen occasionally wasn't an altogether bad thing.

Especially if Daniel thought of it as him having to run around and collect what people wanted to say and sit and translate it. Putting Chozen to work wasn't bad. They could give him a lot to tell everyone

else. Make him do more work.

It was effort for something good, positive. To keep them connected despite the ocean. With friends.

Plus Mr. Miyagi was holding his half of the letter like it was precious. And Daniel could almost forgive Chozen because of the tender look on Mr. Miyagi's face. Almost.

Neighbors

Johnny had dinner plans with his mother.

It was the day Daniel was supposed to go to college but planned to tell Mr. Miyagi. Johnny wasn't so sure about Daniel taking Mr. Miyagi at night to the shop location but Daniel was determined. Said it would seem like he'd gone to classes.

Johnny liked the shop. Liked the space. But he thought taking Mr. Miyagi there in the dark might not be starting off on the right foot. Might not give off as much charm as Daniel believed. But he was sure Daniel could fill in that gap. He could charm enough to make the most run-down place seem okay to Mr. Miyagi or himself.

They drove around for part of the day. Killing time.

Daniel was too excited, too nervous to focus on anything he wanted to do.

They had put together the date jar, but Daniel had said he was too nervous about his surprise for Mr. Miyagi to do anything. He didn't want to ruin any date.

So he drove. Talking as he drove. It was all twisty and winding, everything he said because he was too excited. Jumping from one topic to another. Talking about the last call he'd had with his mother, about his uncle Louie. About the letter, they'd gotten from Chozen and all the things he was planning to write back. About different trees that might be fun to see as a bonsai. That turned into him just trying to list off trees for a couple of hours.

He ended up dropping Johnny off at his mom's new place early.

Laura invited Daniel in when he shifted on his feet outside the front door, determined to walk Johnny up but then unsure whether to come in or not. Relieved she invited him in. A welcome distraction.

She walked around, giving them the tour.

"Three bedrooms, this one's yours," she said smiling warmly.

Johnny's things were in there. A new bed. A bear he hadn't seen since he was little that Daniel seemed way too interested in.

He looked at his Mom, trying to express the *Why would you put it on the bed like that?* mixed with *Where did you even find it?*

She smiled at him. "I kept some of our stuff in storage. Anything Sid said I should throw out went into storage. Glad I decided to not listen to him."

Daniel turned around the room taking it in before grabbing Johnny and pulling him in.

Johnny turned to see what he was looking at. A wall with a big window with a window seat in it and two big bookcases full of books and photos on either side.

Photos of him and the guys. From starting karate, birthday parties at their homes, just random adventures, pictures from New York. From when they met all the way up to the last night in the mansion.

His mother had taken a marker and written "Peas in a pod" on the glass of the photo she'd taken.

Laura walked in and smiled.

"They gave me copies of all the photos. I'm just waiting on getting copies from your trip to Okinawa," she said with a pointed smile. "Not sure *who* to talk to about that. Tommy's trying."

"Chozen sent us a few from the aquarium," Johnny said.

"Chozen huh?" Laura said thoughtfully. "Guy who tried to kill Daniel? Why's he sending you mail?"

"I asked the same question, but he did send the photos and updated us on everyone," Daniel said.

Laura had an amused smile on her lips looking between the two of them. Holding something in, stopping herself from saying something. She turned to continue her tour and showed them the guest bedroom, the kitchen, her office, and the backyard. There was only his fuchsia planted in the garden.

"Not much yet, but that's kind of the fun of it. Daniel you'll have to let me know when Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees officially opens so I can get some."

"Of course Ms. Lawrence," Daniel said.

They ended up sitting for a while talking about plants and what she wanted to put in the garden. She'd gotten a book on plants from a local shop and they poured over it, putting sticky notes on the ones she liked. Purple Needle Grass, yucca, a vegetable garden with carrots, eggplant, squash, and tomatoes, some blue mountain lilacs to cover some of the beds, a desert willow, and a western redbud.

It was going to be a lot of work. But it'd be pretty. And it'd keep her busy.

She looked happy. No fancy dresses. No high heels.

The house was exactly what Johnny would've thought of when he thought of a place that was his mother's. Cozy, bright, functional.

Eventually, Daniel had to leave and Johnny walked him out to his Ford.

"It's going to go great," Johnny said.

"I know, I just hope he likes it," Daniel said holding the box with the paperwork in it.

"He will," Johnny said leaning in through the window of the Ford to kiss Daniel. "He'll love it. Because it's from you."

Daniel smiled at him. "You enjoy your dinner with your mom. I"ll see you later."

Johnny kissed him again before carefully moving back out the window and standing a couple of steps back so Daniel could drive away.

"Very sweet," Laura said wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "Now, what sounds good for dinner. Whatever you want. Let's make it happen."

Johnny smiled following her back to her house.

It was hard not to think of what could've been. How nice growing up in a house with just his Mom might've been. How much easier on the both of them. If things had been just a little different. If he'd found the guys sooner. If, like Bobby had said, they'd all picked a different dojo, if instead of starting a fight with Daniel he'd been a friend from the start if the elderly couple from the flower shop hadn't died, if his mother hadn't met Sid, if Sid had actually been a good person and not

awful, if Kreese had actually cared.

For a long time, Johnny thought it was his fault. Some things were. But he thought Sid hated him because of who he was. Because there was something about Johnny that turned a charming man into something sinister.

He'd thought the same with Kreese the night of the tournament. That Kreese had been patient with him right up until that moment and then because of Johnny something had snapped.

But Johnny had heard Sid's staff whispering at parties when he got older, while sneaking drinks for Ali and him to have in the gardens of whatever fancy place they were in. Whispering that Sid *seemed* charming at first, a dream to work with until there was the smallest bump in the road, until things weren't going his way, until you didn't move fast enough or get his drink just right and then he was a nightmare. Whispers that made Johnny think as he walked through crowded rooms that it wasn't *just* him.

With Kreese it took longer. It took the guys and Daniel and the gentle conversations with Mr. Miyagi and time spent in Okinawa to heal and repair the damage.

He wasn't sure if he'd even fully healed, but it was no longer a raw gaping wound that hurt every time he tried to breathe. It was manageable and there were moments he forgot. When the shadows of them didn't darken his skies.

He'd needed a vacation from his life to see it better. To understand that Kreese and Sid's behavior wasn't his fault, that there wasn't something inherently and irrevocably wrong with him.

His mother pulled out a pitcher of iced tea from the fridge and poured him some. Sitting down next to him at her kitchen island.

"You need a vacation," Johnny told her.

She looked at him head tilted, waiting for an explanation as she squeezed lemon into her tea and dropped it in.

"It can help sometimes," he said.

"Okinawa?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said warmly.

"Maybe after I finish setting everything up," she said. "Do you want to go somewhere? We could go somewhere together."

Johnny nodded and she smiled patting his hand.

"That will be fun," she said.

Johnny smiled, sipping his tea as she got out a list of local delivery shops and set them down in front of him with a flourish, like a fancy waitress at a fancy restaurant to tell him all the options he had to chose from.

He laughed and leaned forward looking at them with the air he'd seen countless times of a guy in a jewelry shop looking overwhelmed trying to tell the difference between actual diamonds and cubic zirconia, determined that he actually could tell the difference to impress whoever he was with.

He picked one and passed it to her and she smiled.

It was nice. To just sit with her. To just talk. To hear the things she wanted to do and work on.

The narrow possibilities he limited himself to opened up.

If he wanted to go to school he could.

He could study whatever he wanted. Not just something Sid found useful. No caveats. No restrictions.

If he wanted to study overseas they could work it out. They daydreamed as they waited for their food. A time where Johnny studied overseas and his mother came to visit. Anywhere in the world.

He could go backpacking if he wanted, not to run away but to actually just go on an adventure for the fun of it.

The problem was he *didn't* want to go anywhere for an extended period of time at the moment. He wanted to stay right there.

But maybe, someday.

When the shop was doing well. When everything else was flourishing. A mini-vacation. A mini trip.

She sketched out her plans for the garden and he helped.

She talked about the business she might start. Something to help and give back. Maybe help other women, single moms like her, like Lucille. She liked that, Johnny liked that.

She said she'd call Lucille and get her input, grabbing another piece of paper to write out her ideas.

When the night came to an end she drove him home.

She'd kept the old car.

Johnny froze when he saw it and she laughed.

"I kept *everything*. I think there's something about losing almost everything that makes you try to hold onto as much as you can. Had it fixed up and maintained and it's been in storage for a while, but it's still reliable," she said patting it. "Kind of part of our family you know? It got us through the rough times."

Johnny nodded, opening the door and sinking into the passenger seat.

It smelled the same, hitting him suddenly like he was a small kid being driven around by his mom, trips to the carhop after a doctor's appointment, sleeping in the backseat, driving to the beach, to the park. Listening to music on the radio. His mother singing as she drove.

It was like a blast from the past. He'd never felt the full force of that phrase until then.

A different world a different time.

When she dropped him off and kissed him on the cheek, he waved her off.

No one was home.

The truck was gone but the Ford was there.

There was fish set on the table getting cold.

He cleaned up.

Mr. Miyagi would want to eat later.

The little outside grill was still going.

Daniel must've been in a rush. Too excited.

Johnny put out the fire, relieved that it'd been small enough not to have spread.

His mother had given him champagne for Mr. Miyagi for his shop.

He put it in the fridge to chill.

He wondered what else they'd like. It looked like they hadn't been able to eat dinner. He could reheat it. It wouldn't be as good as Mr. Miyagi's, but Yukie had shown him ways to reheat fish with rice that wasn't as nightmarish a result as putting it in the microwave. He'd work on that while he waited. Putting the rice back on to warm up again.

He'd brought his bonsai out for company. Telling it about his mother's place, how comforting it was. A dream of what could have been but a nice place to go now. Told it about Daniel in his mother's place, watching them interact. How Daniel's shoulders hadn't been as tense this time like he was getting more comfortable around her, about how when Daniel got home with Mr. Miyagi there might be a shop full of bonsai just like it. A place full of little trees to brighten other people's lives just like this bonsai had brightened his.

Johnny heard the sound of the truck returning and re-set the table with a hot dinner and tea for Mr. Miyagi and waited.

He heard them talking. Mostly Daniel talking about all the designs. Mr. Miyagi telling him about the bonsai. Where they could go to find some good ones.

"Welcome home," Johnny said warmly motioning to dinner, remade.

Mr. Miyagi smiled sitting down to his fish and rice and soup and Daniel hugged Johnny, all excited.

"I just needed to hug *someone,"* Daniel sighed into his neck. "Mr. Miyagi, tell him what you told me."

Johnny sat with Daniel still holding on tight.

"Daniel-san make paperwork mistake," Mr. Miyagi said handing the box over to Johnny. "Fixed it."

Johnny took it as Daniel rested his chin on Johnny's shoulder looking over all excited.

Johnny unfurled it and looked for changes. He found it, next to Mr. Miyagi's name was Daniel's.

He glanced over and Daniel grinned absolutely ecstatic. Delighted. "Partners," he said warmly.

Johnny smiled. He should've expected it. Mr. Miyagi wouldn't have let Daniel give him such a big gift without equaling it out somehow. Balance maybe was a better term for it Johnny thought amused as Daniel pulled away to help himself to dinner and eat.

"We're going to go looking for trees we can turn into bonsai, do you want to join us?" Daniel asked, leaning towards Mr. Miyagi, "What time again?"

"Five am, lots of climbing to do," Mr. Miyagi said.

Daniel blinked then looked sheepishly at Johnny. "Maybe you won't want to join us then," he said with an uneasy look.

"If you don't think you'll need help getting the trees, I can go to the shop and start cleaning up," Johnny said remembering all the spiderwebs.

"You really don't have to," Daniel said looking at him.

"It's fine, I'd like to," Johnny said.

He probably shouldn't have said that. He didn't sleep much longer than Daniel, getting up and eating breakfast with them in the morning before the sun rose, in the dusty gray of the morning. Daniel had dug out his orange puffy coat and he and Mr. Miyagi left and Johnny went to the shop.

The amount of dust and spiderwebs was intense. He'd come prepared with his Walkman and his own bonsai for companions. But it was a lot of work. Getting rid of the dirt and grime and layers of dust that made it seem like the place hadn't been touched in a century.

Johnny tried to remember when the last time he'd been in the area if he could remember the actual shop. He couldn't. No matter how much he tried to remember as he worked.

He locked up to go for lunch, wandering around the area. There was a little cafe further down the street. He entered the bell ringing. He ordered a sandwich and a coffee. A red-haired girl came in looking up

at the menu. She was covered in clay. Smelled like the high school art classroom. She glanced up at him.

"Any recommendations?" she asked.

"I don't know actually," he said.

"New to the area?" she asked.

"More like returned after a long time, but also new I guess," Johnny said.

"Jessica Andrews," she said holding out her hand and smiling up at him.

"Johnny Lawrence," he said.

She smiled up at him. "Nice to meet you, Johnny."

She stepped forward, looking at the menu, and placed her order.

"Hey," she said turning back to him. "Want to sit together? I got time off from the shop. I haven't really had a chance to like meet or talk to anyone."

"Uh sure," Johnny said.

They got their food and sat at a table by the menu. She worked at the ceramics shop across the street. Lived above it. Talked about how she'd been looking forward to having a good time in LA, to enjoy the beaches and the summer but was bored. Had been in town for two months but hadn't met anyone cool. Present company excluded, Johnny seemed cool.

She wanted to go climbing but she was just always making things. Which was fine. But it was lonely. She told him about her stupid boyfriend back home who cheated on her. Talked to him about how boring it was around there. How a summer was supposed to be fun and full of adventures and it'd just been full of clay.

Day in and day out. Clay.

He laughed softly telling her they were neighbors. That he was currently cleaning the shop across the street.

She leaned across the table and pulling a bit of webbing out of his hair. "That explains why you're covered in webs," she said with a

laugh.

"Not surprised," he said frowning at the webbing. "Just let me know if you see the spider that belonged to."

"I'll definitely let you know," she said. "So what kind of shop is it going to be?"

"Plants," Johnny said. "Specifically bonsai."

"That's cool!" she said. "I'm so glad something cool is finally moving in. I mean the place next to us is still for sale and it's empty which sucks. It's like we're the only shop open and other than like kids classes no one really comes by. We take most of our orders over the phone."

Johnny wondered if that was a more popular way of selling things. If it might be a good idea for the bonsai shop. To expect to have someone man the phones. Just in case.

It was nice to talk to someone new. To actually meet the neighbors. He'd never really known any neighbors before. It was nice to walk back together, to hear about the neighborhood. The good places to eat. The places to avoid. The people who were dicks. It was good to know.

He bid her a good afternoon, feeling a little better when he opened the door again. He went back to work and soon the place looked different. Bright. Sunshiney. Ready for the next steps.

Pleased with his work he put away his cleaning supplies and cleaned up before heading off to the Avanti, ready to drive home.

They still weren't back yet so Johnny hopped in the shower ready to get rid of spider webs, dust, and dirt.

They were home when he stepped out of the shower. Mr. Miyagi cooking in the kitchen and soft music was playing from the guest room. Their room.

Johnny knocked softly waiting a moment before pushing the door open. He was still trying to figure out what was polite.

Daniel was dancing, he turned to see Johnny and reached out to grab his wrist, pulling him in.

Johnny caught on quickly. Dancing and fighting held similarities.

Watching your partner to see where they telegraphed their move so you knew where to go, a subtle movement of an arm, a leg, a hip and you followed.

It stopped you from having to look at your feet.

It was probably something that had helped Johnny with karate. Having been made to learn at the country club how to dance from a small age. Having to know on the fly how to move, to stay soft on his feet, to be able to read someone's body language to know whether they wanted him in close or to keep his distance.

Daniel wanted him in close. Pressed right up next to him.

The room had enough space. Not for anything fancy, but for the kind of dancing Daniel wanted to do.

No spins, no space between them. It made it easy.

"How was your day?" Johnny asked, voice barely a whisper.

He didn't have to be loud. Daniel was right there in his arms, arms around him, so close Johnny could feel his heart beating in his chest, feel his breath against his skin.

"We got some nice trees," Daniel said with a smile. "We swung by the shop. You worked hard, I almost didn't recognize it."

"I met the neighbors," Johnny said. "Or a neighbor."

"Oh?" Daniel asked, moving his hand around Johnny's waist along his spine.

"A Jessica Andrews from Ohio, she works at the pottery studio."

"Is she pretty?" Daniel asked, head tilted.

Johnny wasn't sure how to answer that. She was kind of what Johnny expected of a little sister. She had been in town for two months with nothing to show for it. Except for a whole bunch of pottery. He was surprised how little she'd gotten to do despite being in town for so long. But it sounded like she was struggling to get out and explore, like she didn't want to on her own. Which didn't fully match the adventurous spirit she had.

"I think it gets lonely around there. A lot of the shop fronts are still for sale and she lives there. Plus she's really cut up about her breakup."

Johnny had heard a lot about her ex and Elizabeth Anne Rooney. Maybe they could help her make friends. So her whole California experience wasn't a total bust. He remembered how awful breaks up were and what it was like to not have friends. Daniel's hand on his back that was keeping him close was moving down.

"*Johnny,"* Daniel whispered, eyes dark. "Sounds like you made another new friend. Like Chozen?"

Johnny was so surprised he laughed. Chozen and Jessica Andrews were nothing alike.

It almost distracted from the weight of Daniel's hand.

Johnny thought they were going to change the subject to *that,* the hand on his ass, not Chozen or Jessica.

He didn't think he'd have to tell Daniel everything about Jessica. He figured he'd go over and talk to her too. Work something out like he'd planned to with pots for the bonsai. Get custom-made things.

Johnny didn't know where Daniel's mind had gone. What he was thinking about with that look on his face? Johnny took his hand out of Daniel's and lifted his hands to Daniel's face.

"Nothing alike, you'll see when you meet her. You can get to know her yourself. But if you don't mind, before Mr. Miyagi finishes making dinner I'd like to kiss my boyfriend who I've missed all day and haven't seen all day."

He brushed his thumb over Daniel's lips, looking for an answer to his request.

Daniel licked his thumb. Johnny took that as permission and kissed him softly as the radio played romantic ballads, as Daniel's hand that had been holding his and was free now, went up into his hair, the two hands trying to hold Johnny as close to him as possible.

He'd missed Daniel all day. It was why he'd taken his Walkman and bonsai, because he knew the silence would be too much. Missed the sound of him talking, the hand in his, the warmth of his skin, the smell of him, his laugh, his smile, the way he talked with his hands.

What was Johnny going to do if one of them ever had to go somewhere without the other for an extended period of time? He'd be like one of those dogs that whine by the door, moping and sad,

waiting for Daniel to come back and be in his arms again. Or to run back to him, impatient to be home once again.

No matter what happened, no matter the path before, even if it'd been dark and hard, it led to this home. The one that was Daniel and it made everything more manageable, worth it to come home and find Daniel. To feel his lips on his, to hear him talk, and to feel the strong heart beating in his chest.

Somewhere between 14 and 400

Chapter Notes

> According to the wiki Daniel's birthday is December 18, 1966. Which according to my math means he was 18 for the first match and will be 19 for the second All-Valley. I get that the age thing is kind of wonky because otherwise, Daniel's 16 from the candles in the first movie and thus skipped a bunch of grades to graduate over the summer. (thank you usa123 for this alternative explanation when I expressed my confusion on the whole timeline and Scaperanya for also trying to explain the weirdness of the all-valley documents in the first place.)
> Either way the whole things a mess. I'm going with the wiki's birthdate instead of the candles for Daniel.

Daniel thought things were maybe going to start getting good, not that they weren't good, but better. *Better* better. But Johnny barely reacted to Daniel's hand on his ass. Like he hadn't noticed.

What the hell did that mean?

Was it welcome enough that Johnny didn't mind? Could he keep going?

Or was the guy absolutely numb? Was this one of those cases of waiting until marriage?

Wait, Johnny had had sex with Ali.

So what the hell?

They'd dated for 2 years. How long had it taken?

Oh god was he going to have to meet up with Ali and ask?

Was that something you asked your boyfriend's ex-girlfriend?

That seemed to be over the line. Which one he didn't know, but one of them.

Plus she was at school, he didn't want to go all the way out there and be like *Hey Ali, how long into your relationship did you two have sex?*

She'd probably slap him.

He didn't want to say make love. Or become lovers. He needed it to be more impersonal for those two. A separation through terms, which would make it sound worse. Harsher.

He'd deserve to be slapped.

What if it'd only been a few weeks? What if it'd been a shorter period of time?

What if it was *longer*?

Was it like the five-date thing?

100 dates later and congrats you win sex?

He tried to do the math in his head.

How many dates had they officially been on?

How many if you counted all the ones from before? Surely well over 100.

Daniel wanted *something*. He had Johnny in his bed already, but he hadn't *had* Johnny in his bed.

Old married couple was what Yuna wrote.

Had they skipped a step?

Didn't old married couples still have sex?

Surely they did.

Hadn't he overheard old people talking about sex still? Well into their 80's? 90's?

They were open about it, *awkwardly* from what he remembered in Newark, of the old people chatting away in the parks while playing chess.

And Johnny was out here meeting girls.

Daniel already still had to shoo away Chozen who he thought they'd left behind in Okinawa, and now there was some girl at the pottery shop across the street?

It was that stupid game at the arcade with the mallet with gophers.

Johnny had been left alone for a day.

He was like a wounded antelope and the lions came circling.

But that kiss.

All the kisses were always so damn nice.

He was going to have to talk to Johnny. Have to learn more if there were steps and rules.

Which with five dates it seemed like there were. How weird was California? Was it an LA thing? Or just a Johnny thing?

In the morning mail came from the All Valley addressed to Daniel.

Mr. Miyagi showed no interest in it when Daniel showed him, just nodding and getting into his truck, saying he'd go work on the shop and see the boys later. He asked Daniel to teach Johnny the kata Mr. Miyagi had shown him in the mountains.

Johnny was sitting on the wooden walkway reading.

Daniel had the urge to bite him.

An ear, or his neck, to kiss him and leave a mark. A hickey. A love bite.

He needed to get a response, and maybe that'd do it. Proof that Johnny's blood got going somewhere somehow.

What if Johnny was going slow because he thought Daniel's knee was still bothering him? Didn't want to do anything to hurt him?

Daniel frowned at the thought sitting down next to Johnny holding up from the All-Valley. Maybe whatever this said would prove that Daniel wasn't as frail as he looked.

Johnny looked up from his book turning to look at Daniel, putting a bookmark in and setting it aside. Waiting.

"I got mail from the All Valley," Daniel said sitting down next to him.

"Really? Revoking your title for your illegal kick?" Johnny asked with a teasing smile.

Oh, that's where they were with that huh? Mr. two first-place All-Valley trophies was going to tease on technicalities?

Daniel was 100% going to bite him. See how long the teasing lasted then. But curiosity was killing him.

He opened the envelope and pulled out the letter scanning it.

"It *says* I just have to show up and defend my title in the last match. I don't have to compete the rest of the way. A change in the rules."

Johnny frowned leaning over to read the letter over Daniel's shoulder.

"Wait, really?" Johnny asked scooting closer eyeing the paperwork. "Daniel, they haven't changed their rules since they started it. It's the All-Valley *Under 18*. You were 18 for the last one. You'll be 19 for this one. You don't qualify anymore. Why would they even send this to you? Why would they change the rules *now*?"

Huh. Daniel hadn't thought about that. He was a little disappointed but the All-Valley had been stressful the year before. Exhausting.

He leaned against Johnny with a sigh.

Johnny was right, it must've been through an error he'd gotten it in the first place.

He balled it up and threw it towards the house.

He turned his head, besides, there were more interesting things to do. He pressed close against Johnny and kissed the soft skin behind his ear, then his neck. Soft and gentle.

This was more interesting. A better way to spend his day than trying to prepare for a tournament he wasn't even sure he really had wanted to do.

He'd just liked that they called him a champion, said it was *his* title.

He ran his tongue against Johnny's skin, feeling Johnny shiver.

Better. Much better.

He tried to pick a spot he liked. An angle. He let his teeth graze skin. He had to be careful. It was Johnny's neck after all.

Going backward wasn't the goal. He was hoping this would propel him

forward. *Them* forward.

It was a ride for two he wanted if it was an option. He was tired of doing it solo when he had Johnny in his hands, in his arms, he just wanted a green light to move forward, something easier to read and understand.

He nipped at Johnny's neck, trying to tell if it hurt too much but while Johnny had jumped in surprise he hadn't stiffened, hadn't pulled away so Daniel kept going, sucking on skin, drawing out a soft sound from Johnny that was enough to spur him on, to think about working on another, maybe somewhere lower, maybe somewhere else.

Daniel put his hand on Johnny's chest and trailed down and back up, slow, over the fabric and then under, feeling Johnny's skin under his hand, bringing the shirt up with his hand, trying to think of what else sounded good when the phone rang.

"*Daniel*."

That sounded nice. That tone was what he was looking for. Low and thick. *Syrupy*.

So he wasn't a damn monk.

The phone was still ringing.

"It-it might be our moms or Mr. Miyagi. Someone might need something."

Daniel needed something.

But Johnny was right.

He could feel Johnny's heavy breath beneath his hand.

If it was a damn salesman Daniel was going to unplug it.

He pulled away looking at Johnny. Lips parted as he tried to control his breath, pupils dilated, face pink.

Damnit.

Just a quick kiss.

Whoever it was could wait a little longer.

He pressed his lips to Johnny's, slipping his tongue between parted lips, he'd eaten something sweet.

Daniel wanted to keep tasting, to figure out what it was.

The phone was still ringing.

If it was the guys he'd murder them.

He pulled away again.

Damn the damn phone.

Whoever it was it better be important.

Daniel got up and got the phone, answering it to find Mr. Miyagi asking for supplies to be brought to the shop if Daniel had time.

The anger and frustration fizzled out and Daniel took down notes on what Mr. Miyagi asked for.

Charcoal, paper, his pen, maybe Daniel would take the bonsai he'd been working on.

He glanced back.

Johnny was lying on the wooden planks on his back with his arm over his eyes.

Daniel smiled. Okay, he could work with this. He'd figure something out.

But responsibilities first. Then he could come back and maybe they could take this somewhere more comfortable.

A quick trip to the shop. Help Mr. Miyagi like he promised, then back to spend time with his boyfriend. Maybe tack on lover to that title.

"It was Mr. Miyagi," Daniel explained hanging up the phone and holding his list, prepared to look around for all the things they needed in the shop that Mr. Miyagi had asked for.

Johnny didn't move. Didn't respond. Maybe Daniel had overdone it.

He walked over and crouched down next to him.

"He wants me to bring stuff by the shop. I probably should've gone

with him this morning, but he left the time he normally goes fishing and I didn't want to. I wanted to spend time with you. I still do, but we're partners. I don't want to let him down."

He leaned down, struck by a spark of inspiration. Maybe now Johnny would be receptive by flirting.

"I'll take care of you when I get home," he said, leaning down low next to Johnny's ear, he kissed Johnny's cheek where it wasn't covered in his arm.

Then he frowned, this was no good.

He wanted a kiss before he left.

Johnny wasn't responding.

He'd get the things Mr. Miyagi had asked for then come back. Try again when he came back.

He stood up with a sigh.

Maybe he broke Johnny.

He found the paper, the charcoal, some tacks, his favorite pen, and few other things Mr. Miyagi might need. He grabbed the All-Valley tournament letter because he might as well tell Mr. Miyagi about it anyway. He found the tree he'd been working on in the morning.

Johnny was sitting up again, staring at the book in his hands with a frown. He got up after a moment looking around, gazing through the house, searching until his eyes stopped on Daniel.

Daniel pushed one of the glass doors open.

"I got all my stuff I need. I'll see you later okay?"

Johnny nodded coming towards him, he might get that kiss he wanted after all.

Oh, with that look, for sure.

Daniel smiled tilting his head a smile on his lips.

"Do I get a goodbye kiss?"

Johnny stopped a breath away from Daniel and frowned.

"Never."

Daniel blinked at him in confusion.

It was said so firmly, so flatly.

Hey now, what did that mean?

Why'd *he* look upset?

Surely *Daniel* should be upset by that rebuff and rebuke.

Johnny gently tilted Daniel's chin. "Only ever until I see you again. Not goodbye. Never goodbye."

Daniel felt his heart pounding in his chest. Damn.

He didn't want to deliver supplies to Mr. Miyagi.

He wanted to stay there, with Johnny.

Johnny kissed him, it was too short.

Even though it'd been soft and sweet, slow, it was still too short.

Daniel needed a day.

A vacation.

A motel room.

A hotel room.

Something.

Hell, he'd seen a tent in Johnny's trunk. Maybe they could go camping.

Johnny was smiling at him.

"Have fun," he said kissing him, a quick peck on the lips before turning and heading back into the garden.

The bastard was doing it on purpose, wasn't he?

That smile. That damn smile. Did he live off of the continuous frustration in Daniel's life? Did he realize what he did to Daniel and he just refused to take responsibility for it?

Oh, he'd take responsibility for it. Daniel would make sure.

One day he'd corner Johnny, no escape, no interruptions. Just the two of them. And Daniel would take his damn time. Would enjoy whatever they did.

He had a list. They would do it all, slowly. Let Johnny be the one unable to hold back.

Daniel would win.

Maybe this wasn't a good thing to get competitive about.

But that smile was that damn smirk.

The one Johnny had given him in the mirror the first time he'd seen Daniel walk through the doors at Cobra Kai. That playful look. Like Johnny was amused by something and wasn't going to tell him.

He'd corner him and find out, exactly what Johnny was thinking.

Maybe he'd knock two or three off the list in one go.

Daniel turned on his heels with the stuff for Mr. Miyagi and headed out to the Ford.

He could make this quick.

Go help Mr. Miyagi, come back, pick up where they'd left off.

Though that hadn't worked once yet.

Something *always* interrupted.

Dinner with someone, the guys, Mr. Miyagi, and it was like the door he'd opened just a crack was gone.

He was tired or it took too long or something just always happened.

He sighed as he turned on the radio for the drive.

How did most couples do it?

How had Ali and Johnny-no he didn't want to know.

But they'd both lived at home, had nowhere else to go.

Both had been busy, but still, they'd found a time and place to- he

didn't want to know...but he needed advice.

Time. *Something.*

The drive was easy.

He could do this.

He could act like it's a normal moment, a normal time, like everything was fine because it was.

Johnny was at home not thinking of him, not...doing whatever Johnny did when he was alone.

Damn.

Probably Johnny was just reading whatever damn book he was reading before, but what if he *wasn't*?

How fast could Daniel drop off the stuff and turn around?

He had to get himself under control.

To just breathe.

He put a big smile on his face.

Dropping off stuff with Mr. Miyagi, setting up the paper on an old door for him, and joking with him about the All-Valley before Mr. Miyagi sent him across the street to get the pots started.

Damn. Okay. It'd be fine.

He wouldn't get distracted by meeting new people or the curiosity about Jessica Andrews that Johnny had sparked.

He walked in, looking around, curious. He knew with a sinking heart he'd lost already. The momentum was gone. He was too damn curious to stay wound up and focused.

There was a girl making a vase or something, totally focused.

She looked young. A picture of her climbing on the wall with a guy's face cut out.

They talked and it was easy, friendly.

Jessica Andrews.

He introduced himself, mentioning he worked across the street with his partner.

"Oh Johnny?" she asked.

Kind of. How did he work that one out? Technically his business partner was Mr. Miyagi. His other partner was Johnny. Very different.

"Johnny works with us," Daniel said warmly.

He didn't know a good way to explain it. They talked a little longer, longer than he meant to, and he agreed to meet her at 7 pm.

He got why Johnny had laughed now.

She was just looking for a friend.

She wasn't looking to date.

It was a non-starter.

And he remembered what it was like to be in LA without any friends, so he agreed to hang out.

Before he even thought of it. Just agreed. Doing exactly what he feared. Distracted, lost the thread he'd held onto so tightly.

She didn't seem enamored with Johnny. Which was a relief.

He made his way across the street realizing he'd given himself a shorter window than he'd meant to find that thread again.

It might as well be lost. Gone for the time being.

He started chatting with Mr. Miyagi as soon as he opened the door.

Mr. Miyagi nodded, listening to Daniel until there was a break.

"Don't forget," Mr. Miyagi said turning. "Teach Johnny-san new kata, we practice together soon."

"Right, don't worry Mr. Miyagi, I'll go straight home," Daniel said with a nod. "You okay here?"

Mr. Miyagi nodded, then passed the All-Valley Tournament paperwork

back to Daniel. "Should take match to it."

Daniel blinked at him but shrugged, stuffing it back into his pocket and heading back home in a hurry.

Kata.

He'd forgotten he'd promised Mr. Miyagi to teach Johnny the steps to the one they'd learned while out picking bonsai. Mr. Miyagi thought it'd help both of them figure it out if they worked together. Learned better. Some new teaching techniques. But if it meant alone time with Johnny, it would be more fun then any other chore he'd ever been given. He wouldn't even count it as a chore.

Johnny was laying and reading out in the garden. Same book.

He hopped down into the grass and sat down next to him, trying to get a good look at the book.

Dracula.

Daniel laughed. Why didn't Johnny read anything current?

"Hey, Mr. Miyagi wanted me to teach you the kata he taught me when we were digging up trees for bonsai. Ready to learn?" Daniel asked.

Johnny set his book aside with a bookmark in it and nodded.

He stood and Daniel hopped back up, excited to guide Johnny through the moves.

They turned to one another and bowed.

It was different trying to teach someone, he was acutely aware of every move he made knowing that Johnny was following him, every step he made, every movement of his arms, eyes focused on him, and nothing else.

It got in his head.

A warmth flooding through him.

He tried to focus, remembering each step and doing his best to find and follow the flow that always was so easy.

He could see Johnny out of the corner of his eye moving just a beat, half a second behind him.

Better than he did sometimes trying to follow Mr. Miyagi.

There was that two-time champion at his side.

He'd been wondering where that Johnny had gone. He'd seen the trophies in the back of Johnny's closet. Proof of hard work, just like the muscle. The gi's, the white one for practice, the black one for tournaments. The other little metals and other placed trophies from when he started. All hidden away in a box like it was tainted. Like it was hard to look at. Maybe someday he could get it back out into the open. Because even though Kreese had been the teacher, Johnny had won those through hard work. He deserved to recognize how much work he put in.

Daniel moved carefully, in tune with his breath, taking his practiced steps around the garden until they had gone through the moves enough times that Johnny was moving in sync with him. No longer a beat behind him.

Daniel turned and bowed.

He wondered if he could get Johnny to spar.

Johnny bowed back, blue eyes watching him.

Maybe.

He hasn't practiced much with just Johnny. Usually, they practice alone or with Mr. Miyagi. But he has too much energy even after calming kata.

He smiled and moved into a starting stance.

Johnny stared at him for a moment and then mirrored it.

Daniel circled, Johnny followed.

A perfect mirror, reading him easily in the moment.

How was it he can do that for fighting but almost never any other time?

Johnny made the first move and Daniel grinned.

It's what he was waiting for, blocking the arm that reached out to him.

It was like an intricate dance, moving towards each other and away.

Clashing, testing the ground beneath them, trying to figure out where they were.

The first shot Johnny tried was barely a whisper of a move. Easy to track, easy to block.

But now he was trying.

Warming up, and there went his leg, he always went for a kick Daniel remembered.

Able to kick those legs up higher than Daniel had seen before.

He blocked.

There was more weight to it. Like Johnny was picking a level of difficulty, still fine-tuning it.

And then there was a look in Johnny's eyes that Daniel hadn't seen in a long time.

That smirk from earlier in the day reaching his eyes.

Daniel knows in an instant that he fucked up somewhere.

He'd left something open but he didn't know what or where and he was on the ground looking up at the blue sky, the air knocked out of him and Johnny on top of him.

"I believe that's enough points for a win," Johnny said with a smile.

Daniel didn't know what Johnny did or how he did it.

It was too fast but he can...well... he can cheat.

Daniel surged up kissing him and Johnny kissed him back like it was his prize for winning.

But it was a distraction.

Daniel flipped them, pinning Johnny down.

"Cheater," Johnny said.

Daniel laughed, delighted. Kissing him again. He sat up.

"Question."

"We're breaking for questions?" Johnny asked with a frown, brows knit.

"How many dates have we had?"

Johnny blinked looking up at him, fight flooding away as he calculated.

"14?" Johnny asked.

Daniel frowned.

"Wait, which ones are you counting?"

"You've got a different number?"

"Nearly a 100."

"Definitely not 100."

"Are you only counting the ones since we've gotten back?" Daniel said suddenly realizing where the number came from.

"Two weeks of dates," Johnny said. "Mostly hiking, wait where are you starting your counting from?"

"From like the party."

"We weren't dating."

"People count dates *before* they're official," Daniel said firmly leaning down close.

Johnny looked at him thoughtfully. Recalculating. Then he frowned.

"What constitute's a date?"

Daniel groaned sliding off of Johnny and laying down by his side covering his face in his hands. Torture. The whole thing was damn torture. He turned to look at Johnny. He could feel the thread he was trying to follow slip through his fingers. He sighed. "You and me, spending time together."

"Then I need a calculator," Johnny said. He frowned thoughtfully then looked over at Daniel again, that playful look in his eyes again. "Wait so *any time* before we started dating might count?"

"Yes," Daniel said.

Johnny pushed himself up. "Any time we spent *together*?"

"*Yes*."

"Okay, that's easy then."

Daniel bolted up. "Then how many dates?"

"Nearly 400," Johnny said with that smirk.

Daniel was going to kiss that damn smirk away.

Wait.

Four hundred?

How the hell did he get that number?

"How did you-"

"We met over a year ago, saw each other nearly every day, sometimes more than once a day. A year is 365, but we've seen each other more than that," Johnny said, proud of himself.

"That doesn't count! Are you counting the damn beach?" Daniel asked.

Johnny was up on his feet, that frustrating fast movement and he was laughing.

"You didn't specify that we had to like each other. Just had to be together. I didn't make the rules, you did."

Daniel got up, reaching for Johnny but he was dodging out of his grasp. Clearly pleased at the loophole he'd exploited.

The way he was staying out of Daniel's reach, Daniel was going to catch him and he was going to kiss him so much that he wouldn't be able to think straight.

He just had to catch him first.

He knew he was smiling back at Johnny.

"You know that's not what I meant."

"I know," Johnny said warmly stopping suddenly and Daniel hadn't expected him to stop moving and crashed into him but Johnny didn't move, they didn't fall, but Johnny caught him and kissed him, beating Daniel to it. Deepening it. "You like lists, we can count them back, it might be fun, together."

It did sound fun. A waste of time, they'd probably argue over what counted as a date, but also fun. *Anything* could be fun with Johnny.

Mysteries abound

Johnny had taken a nap in the garden. There was a spot well-shaded where he liked to read during the day and after they'd sparred Daniel had hit the shower because he'd run out of time.

Johnny was pretty sure he was dreaming.

Too much *Dracula* had seeped into his brain.

Because it was dusk and there was a man walking through the house.

Snooping. Looking at things.

He was tall and wearing all black, smiling a devilish smile as he went through Mr. Miyagi's things.

He didn't pocket any of it. So it wasn't a thief. A vampire maybe?

It's not what he thought Dracula would look like.

Dracula had a mustache.

This man had no facial hair, but long black hair slicked back into a ponytail.

He darted off to hide as Daniel walked out of the shower in his robe, dancing and humming on the way to their room.

The man stopped to look near the front door at Mr. Miyagi's medal of valor.

The smile was sinister.

The man panicked looking caught and then ducked low and disappeared up the chimney like a reverse Santa Claus.

Definitely a dream. No one in real life would do that.

Johnny shut his eyes going back to sleep, hoping for a different, less weird dream.

Johnny woke up when he felt Daniel gently patting his shoulder.

"Hey, I was wondering where you were."

It was dark out and Daniel looked a little shaken up.

Johnny sat up fast.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," Daniel said with a smile not quite bright as normal.

Johnny pulled him close, into his arms.

Daniel had had plans to meet up with Jessica. Something about how she had no friends and showing her around.

He'd asked Johnny if he wanted to come but he was too tired, had overdone cleaning the shop.

But now with panic flooding his veins, he was wide awake.

"Did you get hurt?"

He'd let down his guard. He knew Daniel was a magnet for danger. But he thought Jessica wouldn't bring any with her. That the neighborhood would be fine.

"Yeah, just some guys determined that I join the All-Valley this year, came into the shop. They didn't start anything really but it was there you know. Like the start of something. But I'd never met them before. It's not like you or Chozen, they're gunning for me and I don't even know them or anyone they would know," Daniel whispered into Johnny's shoulder.

"How many?"

"Two," Daniel said.

Maybe someone *had* broken into the house. But how? They'd come in from the garden side and there was a big fence.

Through the gate?

Johnny would, when Daniel was calm, grab a knife and poke around in the chimney to see if there was someone still up there, maybe call Tommy and ask for advice on mystery solving.

But first Daniel was upset.

Two guys.

Against Daniel at the shop.

Johnny was pissed.

For the All Valley?

Who cared?

"Did you tell them you were too old?"

Daniel laughed softly into his neck. "No, but I walked Jessica back and came home. Kind of ruined the plans."

"Do you want to do something with me?" Johnny asked.

"Yes," Daniel said.

He was wearing his red shirt, one of the ones from Okinawa under a blue hoodie. Dressed nicely for a night out.

They could do a night out.

He just needed to poke around first.

Maybe tea. Tea first. Tea was calming.

"How about we have some tea, I make a call, and you think about where you want to go or what you want to do," Johnny said.

Daniel nodded but didn't move.

"Want me to carry you?" Johnny asked.

Daniel took a deep breath and slowly pulled back.

"No," he said softly standing up.

Johnny took his hand pulling it up and kissing the top of Daniel's hand.

"I'm sorry about your evening."

Daniel ran his free hand through his dark hair with a sigh.

"It's fine. I just-I'm getting tired of it you know? Like every couple of months it feels like someone new hates me. I've managed to befriend

or sort of come into good standing with everyone up until now, but this one, Johnny, he looked like he wanted to rip me to shreds for the fun of it. Even if he got what he wanted. He was...worse than everyone else."

"He came *into* the shop?"

"Yeah," Daniel said softly.

"I'll ask the guys about security measures."

"I don't think that's necessary," Daniel said. "I don't want to worry Mr. Miyagi."

"Jimmy's cousin's bar had pests, they got rid of them, Let me ask around okay? Do you know this guy's name?"

Daniel sighed as they walked back into the house.

Johnny depositing him in the kitchen at one of the tables and starting the kettle.

"Mike."

Johnny turned with a frown.

"Mike?"

Johnny had seen a Mike in one of the karate magazines Bobby got. A Mike Barnes. Couldn't be the same one. He wasn't LA though.

"Yeah. You know him?"

"I know of *a* Mike. I don't know if it's him. He's not an LA local for karate. So we haven't fought. But he sometimes is in the karate magazines. They gave him the title of *Bad Boy* even though that's usually used for...well it's usually used for a guy girls want to date for looking rough on the outside and their parents not liking him but being okay on the inside. He's actually just a dick from what I've heard. I mean you have to pay to put out an ad like that in the magazines, so he's full of himself to take out a full-page ad or someone is. Because it wasn't an ad for a show or a fight or anything. Just him. He's the kind of fighter that Kreese would love. Though I don't think he was even on Kreese's radar. He didn't really look outside of LA. He didn't pay attention to the competition."

The kettle whistled, finished boiling and he set the box of tea out in

front of Daniel so he could pick one and grabbed the mug Daniel always gravitated towards, it looked homemade.

Johnny set it on the table in front of Daniel and grabbed another mug for himself.

Pouring water into both and setting it back on the stove.

Mr. Miyagi's truck was home. So he was around somewhere. He'd have to talk to him too.

Johnny grabbed a pair of scissors, thinking a knife might scare Daniel.

"I'll be right back," he said picking out a tea bag and set it down next to Daniel for himself, and walked out towards the fireplace ducking low. He lit a match to see better and with match and scissors held in front of him, he twisted to look up into the chimney.

No demonic man was hiding up there.

That was a relief. Maybe it *was* a dream.

But- *But!*

There was a shoe print in the fireplace.

Johnny felt his heart race.

Damn it. It *hadn't* been a dream. He should've gotten up. He should've tried to fight the bastard.

He grabbed the phone and called Tommy.

"Hello?" came after the fifth ring.

Tommy sounded tired. It was the first week of school. He'd been sent all the guy's schedules and syllabuses. He was reading the books they were supposed to be reading, think they could all talk about it together like old times.

But his heart was pounding in his chest to think that far in the future.

Someone had broken in. And not a small guy he could easily take.

A guy *bigger* than Kreese.

"Tommy, it's Johnny. Someone broke into Mr. Miyagi's house. There's a shoe print in the fireplace. I was half asleep so I thought it was a dream. Daniel's being harassed by- well... possibly Mike Barnes and his friends, there's was two of them but usually, there's more. What do I do? Do I tell them about the break-in? Do I call the police? Daniel's already pretty shaken already," Johnny whispered in a rush.

"Woah woah, Johnny slow down. You saw someone poking around Mr. Miyagi's?"

"Yeah. I don't think he took anything though."

"Hold on," Tommy said.

Johnny heard him rummaging through the drawer.

"Okay, I'll call Jimmy to see if it's even worth filing a report. Usually, it is but the police can be...a pain. Plus with Daniel already dealing with shit it might be best not to. Try to get a picture of the print with like a ruler next to it so we know more about it. I'll send Dutch to do a sweep, maybe take Daniel out to the movies or something in the meantime. Do you remember where you saw him? Damn, I wish I was closer. I'm going to have to make Dutch do everything. Don't touch anything that you think he touched. I'll make Dutch dust for prints."

Tommy sounded like he was excited and frustrated.

Johnny sighed. "Yeah okay, I also want to know a good way to get security for the shop. You know, like how Jimmy's cousins got rid of their pests."

"I'll ask Jimmy when I call him," Tommy said. "Now where all did you see this guy?"

Johnny told him about where he'd seen the man looking around, going through Mr. Miyagi's stuff. Then after answering Tommy's questions and saying goodbye.

He found a ruler, and a camera with flash and took a picture of the footprints. They weren't great not full clear prints, but it looked like something had been burned in the fireplace after he'd gone up and there were markings on the floor left behind because of it.

He left the camera out for Dutch and returned to Daniel.

Daniel had made their tea and Johnny put away the scissors then sat

down next to him.

"Called Tommy, he's calling the guys. We'll figure something out," Johnny said taking Daniel's hand in his.

"It might not be that big of a deal," Daniel said. "Maybe they just wanted to come to scare me and they'll leave me alone."

"Maybe, maybe not. But still, someone ignored the closed sign, came in, and threatened you. We shouldn't take that lightly. I'm not going to take that lightly," Johnny said.

He lifted up the cup of tea and breathed it in.

Daniel laced his fingers through Johnny's.

"Since you're all dressed up with nowhere to go, where do you want to go?" Johnny asked. "The movies? Out for ice cream?"

Daniel smiled. "How about a drive-in?"

"Okay," Johnny said sipping his tea thoughtfully. "Your car or mine?" he glanced at the clock.

They could make the 8 o'clock show.

Daniel really hadn't stayed long.

Maybe he should change. Dress up too.

He'd have to let Mr. Miyagi know that Dutch was coming by to check something...what would he say? That he saw something suspicious? Daniel didn't want to worry Mr. Miyagi but a stranger had come into the house.

"Yours," Daniel said.

Johnny smiled lifting Daniel's hand to his, gently kissing Daniel's knuckles.

"I'll change, be right back," he said after another sip of tea.

He got up and went to their room, pausing to knock on Mr. Miyagi's door.

"Hai?"

Johnny pushed the door open a little.

"We're going to the movies. Dutch might swing by, I want him to check something weird I saw. If you...if you see any tall guy with a black ponytail be careful okay? Or some guy named Mike."

"Problems?" Mr. Miyagi asked with a frown.

"Maybe nothing yet, but I just want to be cautious. And if you see anything weird or if something goes missing please let me know."

Mr. Miyagi studied him for a moment then smiled and nodded. "Hai Johnny-san."

"Okay, there's still hot water in the kettle if you want some tea. Avoid the fireplace."

Mr. Miyagi nodded and Johnny carefully slid the door shut before walking to the room to quickly get ready, uneasy with every step.

He should do a sweep.

He should take Mr. Miyagi on their date, find an excuse to make sure they were both safe in his car.

But Dutch was coming. And the guy had to have left. He was too big to just hide somewhere other than the chimney. It wasn't like he was hiding under the bed. Though Johnny checked anyway. And their closet.

Daniel was wearing red. Something nice from Okinawa. Johnny looked through his shirts. Dark jeans would work, white shirt, he had a jacket his mom got him the last time he'd seen her. A denim jacket. It was softer than he expected, made him think it was expensive. Probably was now that he thought about it.

He fixed his hair, glancing at his watch, grabbed his wallet and keys, thought about taking the bonsai but forced himself to leave it. It was fine. The guy was gone. If he was taking the bonsai he had to figure out how to also take Mr. Miyagi without freaking anyone out.

He turned and hurried to where Daniel was waiting with his tea.

"Ready?" he asked, he wasn't sure if it was a good look or not. He'd been in a bit of a hurry. Not wanting to leave Daniel alone in the house until *after* he'd gotten the all-clear from Dutch.

Daniel took his hand with a smile on his face, kissing him gently on the cheek.

Mr. Miyagi would be okay he told himself. The man confronted a storm to save his enemy and broke essentially a solid wood beam. The man had jumped over a fence.

He could defend himself. And Dutch would be there soon to help.

He still felt guilty.

Worried as he drove to the drive-in.

As he paid for their tickets and got them popcorn and soda.

As they set up the speakers in the Avanti, as he put the top up for privacy, so they could fade into darkness.

So he could hold Daniel's hand and run his thumb over the back of his hand, worrying it like a stone as they watched the film Daniel had picked.

After a while he realized Daniel wasn't watching the film anymore.

Felt eyes on him.

He turned.

Daniel reached out, gently pulling the jacket back, his shirt down, looking at the bruise, admiring his handy work.

Johnny had to look away.

Daniel was so focused. He got so bored so quickly with the movie.

Johnny tried to focus on the movie.

Wait.

Was the reason they came here not for the movie?

Johnny turned back to the passenger seat, forcing himself to turn, he could feel his skin getting hot, the warmth of his ears.

Daniel was running his fingers along the back of Johnny's neck.

Distracting.

Daniel was close. Leaning closer.

Johnny leaned over to meet him, kissing him, fingers gently reaching out to Daniel's jaw, cupping the side of his face.

Daniel shifted more towards him.

Johnny remembered earlier in the day, the question about dates. It was the second time it'd come up.

Something was there he was missing.

He pulled back and Daniel pouted.

He didn't move far though.

"What is it about the number of dates?" Johnny asked.

"That's what *I* want to know," Daniel said with a huff.

Johnny ran his thumb over Daniel's cheek. Waiting.

Daniel sighed.

"At the party, you said you didn't let people feel you up until after five dates. Is it some weird Californian thing again or just a Johnny Lawrence thing? What comes after?"

Johnny stared at him.

Daniel's other hand was on his thigh.

When had he-?

Why had he-?

The party was when Daniel was drunk. Kissed him. He'd been-fuck, he *had* said that, hadn't he?

Had Daniel-

Johnny sighed.

"It's not a California thing or a me thing,"

"What?"

"It was just-I thought you were just-" he took a deep breath and tried

to organize his thoughts that had scattered at the realization. "It was a bad joke because I thought maybe you were like trying to catch up with Ali or like rebounding, and you were drunk, so it was like a gentle rebuff. I was trying to let you down without letting you down. Does that make sense? Because I was interested but it wasn't a good time, and I don't-you were still dating Ali and your heart had just been broken and your pride. I didn't want to take advantage. It was supposed to mean like come back when you're not dating someone and not drunk and let's see then."

Daniel's arm was over the back of the seats and after a blink, he turned his head and buried his face in his arm.

Was he mad?

Johnny turned to look at the film again, hand coming down to cover the one on his thigh.

Running his fingers over the back of Daniel's hand.

"Are you mad?" Johnny asked after awhile. Softly.

"No," Daniel said. "Not at you. I just. I spiraled. I should've just asked. I keep telling myself I should just ask and I don't. I'm upset with myself."

Johnny leaned in close. "Did you want dating to be like an arcade game? A reward? I could ask Bobby where he got his sticker booklet."

Daniel laughed looking at him, cheek against his arm. "I know why *I* got tripped up. Why didn't *you* make a move?"

Johnny leaned back, against the door of the Avanti looking at Daniel. "A couple of reasons. The party-"

"What *else* happened at that damn party?" Daniel asked with a sigh, pouting.

"You had a panic attack during 7 minutes in heaven about sex," Johnny said gently. "I didn't want to pressure you to do anything you didn't want to do."

"Oh," Daniel said softly. "I forgot about that."

Johnny smiled softly, taking the hand that had been on his leg gently holding it in his. Johnny looked at the hand he was holding, running

his fingers over the soft skin. Trying to think through the information he'd be operating on. How to explain it. Maybe he'd been wrong. But maybe Daniel was thinking something else from what he'd said.

"Everyone likes different things. I figured if you wanted to, if you were ready, one day you'd let me know."

"How long were you going to wait?" Daniel's voice was soft.

"Didn't matter. I like spending time with you. It could've never been on the table and that's fine. I don't want you to do something you don't want to."

He didn't fully hear what Daniel said, he was muttering into his arm again, into his blue hoodie.

It sounded like

Damn fucking gentleman.

Or

Ham duckling pelican.

Johnny couldn't be sure. Sometimes Daniel said weird things. So the second option wasn't completely out there even if it was weird.

Johnny looked out at the movie again.

"Plus maybe I wasn't ready for a long time either. I mean it's not like I know what I'm doing," he said with a laugh looking back at Daniel.

"You don't know what you're doing?" Daniel asked amused.

"Do any of us know what we're doing?" Johnny asked.

"Did you just verge from saying you're inexperienced with guys to philosophy?" Daniel asked with a laugh, a smile on his face.

He was leaning forward and Johnny met him halfway. Shifting to face him, mirroring like they had when they were sparring.

"You do not want to know who gave me the talk," Johnny said amused. "Nothing should be trusted."

Daniel wrinkled his nose. "Not Sid."

"Thank god no. On the general front, Mom handled that. Babies and respect were the majority of that conversation. No, Bobby and Dutch."

Daniel laughed and Johnny smiled. "What did they get their information from Cosmo or something?"

"No, but Tommy's aunt works for magazines so she's always got a stash full of magazines so we did read some Cosmo, and...people *really* like different things."

Some of their tips had been the stuff of nightmares. Like reading a horror novel in the form of a magazine.

Daniel seemed thoughtful for a moment.

"Wait when did Dutch talk to you?"

"At the lake house."

"I talked to him, he should've been fairly accurate."

"Is that what you were talking about?"

Daniel laughed. "Yeah, he asked so I told him."

"I did not get a part 2," Johnny said shaking his head amused.

He thought about the afternoon.

Blessing Mr. Miyagi's phone call because he'd been having a rough time staying focused.

But maybe, *maybe*

His hand reached up to his neck.

He might've been reading the situation wrong.

Not Daniel just being playful, or a pain in his neck literally.

His mind always went back to the party, it sounded like both of them did, but to different things. They were trying to use it as a starting point. How to understand one another. But maybe they'd both been wrong.

Daniel kept going back to to kissing him and the joke Johnny had made.

Johnny went to seeing Daniel's eyes widen and the panicked look on his face, the way he bolted from the room as soon as Dutch opened the door. How he'd worried that he'd made things worse. The way it looked like the room had been closing in on Daniel, unsure what to do because they weren't close. They weren't much of anything at that point. So he thought maybe nothing would ever happen. Thought that was just how it might be even before they dated. That only dream Daniel was interested.

If that *wasn't* the case then there was a good chance he'd been reading Daniel wrong in *a lot* of situations. Wasted a lot of time using breathing techniques to calm back down when Daniel wanted to *not* be calm.

There was also that look he got from time to time.

He knew pupils dilated in anger, in fear. He saw it a lot when fighting. Had seen it in the mirror enough times. He'd been reading that instead of-he'd been assuming.

The lady he talked to about Sid told him he needed to talk to people about how they felt, about how he felt, about the questions he had.

To just ask.

That not everyone would bite his head off for asking questions like Sid did.

That most people didn't mind and that it wasn't his job to try and figure out what they wanted without asking. That he wasn't a mind reader and shouldn't let people get mad at him for not being one.

He rubbed his face.

Daniel was quiet watching him, and yup there was that look. The one he always thought was something else.

Johnny moved closer. "So are you interested in sex?"

"Yes," Daniel said amused.

"And this look, the quiet way you get, it's not because you're upset or scared?"

Daniel frowned. "No, is that what you've thought?"

"The first time you really got quiet and stared at me *it was anger,*

right? In Mr. Miyagi's office when I came to apologize?"

Daniel reached out and cupped his face. "Yeah, I was scared and pissed. But it hasn't been that in a long time. A *long* long time."

"So what do you want to do?" Johnny's heart was racing.

Normally he'd try to curb his thoughts, try to get himself under control, lots of breathing. But it sounded like he didn't have to anymore. Or not as much. That was such a long-held habit at this point that he'd have to work on it. On letting go.

"*Everything*," Daniel said with a breathy laugh.

"You have a list?" Johnny asked with a teasing smile.

"I do," Daniel said.

Of course he did.

Johnny shouldn't have been surprised, he leaned forward kissing Daniel.

"Pick one that's less likely to get us in trouble," he whispered into the kiss.

They were still kind of in a public place.

The movie was still going.

They had plenty of time.

Daniel had a look on his face like he was thinking. Like Johnny had asked him an impossible task.

Johnny moved to kiss along Daniel's jaw, the side of his neck, this could keep him plenty occupied while Daniel went over his list to make a decision. That hadn't changed, probably never would, that Johnny liked kissing Daniel, anywhere. Johnny licked Daniel's neck slow, pleased at the shiver it elicited. Revenge for the afternoon.

He had an idea. He had a lot of ideas, but a lot of them were too much for the location or space.

He shrugged out of his jacket. It wasn't that cold in the Avanti anyway.

Daniel turned, pulling him back into a deep kiss and Johnny ran his tongue over Daniel's.

He ran his hands down Daniel's sides, his hips, back up touching where he could. Unzipping Daniel's blue hoodie, his hands running up under Daniel's shirt, feeling warm skin.

He wished they were home, in their room. Somewhere he could see, but this was fine. There'd be other times.

"Can I touch you?" Johnny asked, his hands on Daniel's hips.

Looking down pointedly and then back at Daniel.

Daniel looked like he was going to say something, like he'd figured out what he was going to suggest off his list but he changed his mind. Changing course and nodding, a warm "yes."

Johnny kissed him, moving his jacket like a blanket over Daniel's lap.

They weren't close to the other cars but he wanted to be careful. Everyone should've been paying attention to the movie or their own partner they were with, but he would still create as much privacy as he could, even if it meant he wouldn't see what he was doing. But he figured this he could do. Knew how to do it, thought he knew how to do it. Confidence always helped. Even if it was held up like a house of cards.

He shifted in closer running his tongue over Daniel's, tasting the moan on his lips that Daniel let out as he touched him. A louder moan than Johnny had expected.

He'd have to keep kissing Daniel. That was never a problem. Though he wanted to watch his face. That'd have to wait for some other time.

The windows were shut, but it didn't mean that anyone walking by couldn't hear.

He'd thought about replacing his hand with his mouth but there was no way they wouldn't get caught then. Not if anyone got anywhere near the Avanti.

His Avanti wasn't sound proof.

It didn't keep sound in or out.

Plus it'd be obvious to anyone what he was doing.

Maybe it still was.

Daniel didn't seem to know what to do with his hands, one was flittering around Johnny's arm, like he wanted to get a good grip on him, to hold on, sometimes it'd dip under the jacket like he wanted to help Johnny, or to hold the hand around him. He settled eventually for one arm around Johnny's shoulders, like he needed to hold him close and the other on the back of Johnny's head, fingers in his hair, kissing him back in that hungry way.

The way that felt like a conversation.

One Johnny felt like he finally understood.

He'd been reading the wrong dictionary, following the wrong words.

They'd both been following the rules they'd thought were understood from the same night but they were vastly different. But he got it now, and when Daniel pulled back Johnny followed, capturing the sound, not stopping it but quieting it, keeping it for himself, for them until Daniel stilled, panting and looking up at him.

Johnny smiled dipping low to kiss him again. Maybe if he kept kissing Daniel he'd figure out a way to tell him how he felt without feeling like his heart was going to bolt. He'd get the courage to say it, by whispering it in every kiss on his skin until it felt like a normal thing to say. Like practicing to say something in the mirror. If he kept saying it in his head maybe he'd figure out how to say something that seemed so simple but kept retreating back down his throat.

It seemed easy. Like picking out flowers for a bouquet to say what he felt. But not everyone knew that, not everyone could read the roses or the lilies or carnations and even still it didn't feel like enough. Just like three words didn't seem enough and he couldn't even figure out how to say them. But he'd figure it out. Eventually in time, like everything else.

Apologies Delivered Too Late

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Awful people were just a blip in Daniel's life. Maybe if he didn't spend so much time thinking about them they could just disappear and Daniel could just focus on the good things, like finally being on the same page with Johnny and the boneless feeling he had.

Johnny was driving back home. Which Daniel wasn't happy with, but the movie had ended and they couldn't just stay there.

Something always interrupted.

But maybe when they got home-wait was that Dutch's van?

Damnit.

He'd forgotten that Johnny had said he'd called the guys. He should've known it'd be short lived.

After the shop was set up and they were making money Daniel was going to save up for an apartment.

Johnny gently let go of his hand, getting out of the Avanti and Daniel followed.

Johnny turned and kissed him gently at the doorstep. The door opened and they both jumped, startled.

Dutch laughed leaning against the doorway, holding a flashlight.

"What even are you doing? It's not like you're dropping one of you off, you both live here you dorks."

"Is everything safe?" Johnny asked.

Dutch gave him a little salute, before flipping the flashlight he was holding in his hand.

"All clear, but I'm spending the night love birds."

Daniel sighed as Johnny pulled away.

"I'm going to take a shower," Johnny said, slipping away and into the bathroom.

Daniel didn't blame him.

But now had a weird understanding of why Johnny showered every night without fail. Maybe it wasn't the main reason *every time*, but it was something to think about.

If Dutch wasn't there he'd see if he could join him.

If it wasn't Mr. Miyagi's house.

That apartment was imperative.

Dutch walked back to the guest room.

Daniel sighed following.

Dutch beelined straight for his desk pulling something out of the drawer and turning.

"So you didn't open this yet huh?"

Daniel caught the packet. He sat down on the edge of his bed and flicked the envelope open. He upturned it into his hand while Dutch looked through the photos on his desk from Okinawa, sitting at his desk, kicking his feet up.

"This Kumiko huh?" Dutch asked holding up a picture of the three of them looking up at the swimming overhead manta rays and fish.

Daniel looked up. "Yeah."

"Cute."

Daniel flipped the photos over.

New York.

Photos he'd seen in Johnny's room at his mom's.

But there were *more*.

Not just photos of him and the guys or all of them together, but photos of him talking to Johnny, a big smile on his face as they walked through New York, holding hands, Johnny smiling softly back

at him, listening, wearing that blue jacket.

There was a photo of them asleep on the bus back from Coney Island, curled up against each other. It looked both comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time.

There was a picture of the two of them standing in front of his favorite painting. Johnny turned slightly towards Daniel, Daniel up on his tiptoes whispering in Johnny's ear, holding hands.

Daniel glanced up, Dutch was looking at him.

"I thought if I took all those photos then Johnny would realize you liked him back," he said. "But I don't like wasting film and I didn't finish the roll during our trip, so I didn't get it developed until summer, and well, you were both gone." He shrugged. "Looks like you had fun though," he said holding up another photo from the aquarium.

Daniel nodded flipping to the next one, he remembered a few of them, of Dutch with his disposable camera, but there were so many where Daniel hadn't noticed, lost in his own world, too focused on Johnny.

"Oh, before I forget and on a shitty note, want to tell me about this Mike guy?" Dutch asked leaning the pictures against the bonsai.

Daniel sighed, he told Dutch about the guys who'd come into the shop even though he'd flipped the sign. How for some reason they wanted him to compete in the All-Valley which Johnny had pointed out he couldn't even compete in.

Dutch pulled a magazine out of his jacket, flipped through a couple of pages, it was black and white like the kind of magazine you ordered stuff out of.

"This the guy?" Dutch asked.

It was definitely the guy, Mike Barnes. *Karate's Bad Boy*. Whatever the hell that meant.

"Yeah, that's him."

Dutch nodded leaning back and looking at the photo. "You be careful around this guy Daniel. He's a piece of shit from what I've heard. There are rumors he fights anyone who gets in his way. He won't hold back around a girl or an old man, so he for sure isn't going to be nice

to you if he's got his sights set on you. Why he'd be after you for the All-Valley's got me though. I mean it's a *trophy*. There's not actually money attached to it. You only get money for that shit *after* 18. When people can bet on you or if you compete for like a scholarship." Dutch pushed himself up. "Maybe he's got a sponsor. Who'd be pissed off you won last time?"

"I don't know. I mean I would've considered you guys but you guys aren't pissed. Really it was only Cobra Kai."

"Hmm, shit I was supposed to be taking notes," Dutch said patting his jacket pockets and digging out his notebook. "Tommy's gonna give me an earful if I don't do this properly. You know, maybe Johnny and I will go get a list of everyone you went up against last year and see if like Barnes had some rich older brother in the tournament you defeated. I doubt it, but it has got to be All-Valley related. Just got to figure out, what was it Tommy said? Who lost the *most* last year."

"The only person I can think of is Johnny," Daniel said softly.

"Clearly you've got a one-track mind," Dutch said rolling his eyes. "I get it, *focus* LaRusso."

"No, I mean from the tournament. He's the one who had the worst go of it, right?" Daniel said leaning forward.

"Oh yeah but he's no evil mastermind. We've got no connection to Mike Barnes."

The door opened and Johnny came in sinking down on the edge of the bed next to Daniel.

"Confirmed it's Mike Barnes," Dutch said holding up the magazine.

"Damn," Johnny said.

"Don't worry either of your pretty heads," Dutch said. "I'll keep you company, go get ready for bed LaRusso. Let Johnny look at those photos I gave you guys."

Daniel pressed the photos into Johnny's hands and kissed him gently on the cheek before dipping out to get ready. Not missing, before he shut the door, the way Dutch flopped onto the bed next to Johnny.

He sighed.

This was his damn life, huh? At least it was better than all six of them trying to share a bed.

All hope to be alone for the night gone.

But the anger that flared up usually, the frustration over it didn't flare up as high as it had the last couple of times.

Dutch was there because he was worried. About *him.* Because of Mike Barnes.

They both were. Worried and upset on his behalf.

It was comforting.

He got ready and came back.

Johnny was on his side of the bed reading.

Dutch had changed and was on the other side taking notes in a notebook.

Dutch smirked looking up at him and patted the space between him and Johnny.

Clearly not planning to move.

His options were through the middle or to climb over Johnny.

Daniel flicked off the overhead light rolling his eyes grabbing the whale shark and throwing it at Dutch who caught it with a look of surprise.

He had a feeling that it was more on the behalf of the whale shark than for himself.

He walked over to Johnny's side of the bed. He was reading by lamplight.

Daniel tried to go over him.

Johnny glanced up and Daniel stopped, caught, mid-straddle. Unable to make himself move on, like sitting on Johnny with his hand on his abdomen was where he had planned to be, even though he'd meant to keep moving, to move fast. But he was like a deer, caught in headlights when those blue eyes looked up from the book.

Maybe this was a silly way to get into bed. But he knew Dutch had done it on purpose to make it awkward. Maybe *he'd* picked the more awkward option.

Johnny was looking up at him and Daniel felt his face redden, watched as Johnny's did, and heard Dutch laugh around the whale shark in his arms.

Daniel hurried to Johnny's other side wiggled under the blankets pulling them up to his chin, turning his back to Dutch.

Johnny and Dutch left to go find their list of suspects, which was disappointing. But Dutch made breakfast and Mr. Miyagi recommended they do kata in the morning to practice, to re-center.

It was going well.

He was getting better at it. Catching on.

Mr. Miyagi had been right, teaching Johnny had made him work his way through the parts he'd been struggling on.

Watching Johnny practice had also helped. Adjusting to make sure he got it all made it so much easier.

The gate opened and a tall man walked into the garden asking for Mr. Miyagi.

The last time a stranger came into the garden they'd flown to Okinawa. Daniel had nearly died. Mr. Miyagi had nearly died. They met Chozen. Nothing good came from strangers coming into the garden.

This guy talked about South Korea and Daniel tried to wrack his brain over when Mr. Miyagi had ever mentioned Korea.

Mr. Miyagi had fought in Italy. Was born in Okinawa, had moved to Hawaii and then LA. There wasn't much else on his country list.

So what was this guy talking about? The All-Valley? They heard about the All-Valley all the way in South Korea?

Why?

Daniel had never heard of it before coming to-wait what?

Kreese was dead?

What the hell?

Should he tell Johnny?

How would he tell Johnny?

Kreese had tried to kill him. And now he was dead from, was this guy trying to make it sound like Kreese had died from a broken heart? Was that...even feasible?

Mr. Miyagi was nodding, wishing the man well and then he was bowing and expressing his sympathy.

Daniel followed suit, puzzled and confused.

How could Kreese be dead? Was he *that* old? *Had* been that old?

The man left.

Daniel turned to Mr. Miyagi who was ready to pick up where they'd left off.

"Mr. Miyagi," Daniel whispered. "Do we tell Johnny?"

"Not yet," Mr. Miyagi said. "Confirm first."

Confirm first?

Some guy just showed up and said Kreese was dead.

That was huge.

Sid was gone and now so was Kreese.

Daniel knew he *shouldn't* cheer on the death of someone, but the guy was evil.

But maybe Mr. Miyagi was right.

Maybe it'd be painful for Johnny.

Sid was the shitty dad Johnny got and Kreese was the one he sought out who failed him.

He couldn't think of Kreese in the same vein as his own father or Mr. Miyagi's, but there was a chance that despite everything Johnny

would take it the same.

He'd talk to the guys, ask them.

When they finished with kata he left Mr. Miyagi to sit with his tea and think about his trees to get ready.

His mind was too scattered. He had to ask for advice before he said the wrong thing.

Daniel went to his room, changed, and grabbed the paperwork that Bobby gave Johnny. The stuff that had Bobby's class schedule.

He hopped in the yellow Ford to drive to UCLA. He tried to think of how to tell Bobby that Kreese was gone. Practiced it over and over again in the car, trying to sound sympathetic. He hoped the shock would help.

He parked his car and hopped out. He crossed across the green, tapping a college kid on the shoulder asking for some intro class on the list of Bobby's classes and followed the directions, looking at the clocks and then finding the classroom.

He waited outside rocking nervously on his heels.

According to the schedule, Bobby had three hours between this class and the next. Plenty of time to tell him that Kreese was dead and ask if he should tell Johnny.

Figure out how to tell Johnny.

Daniel's opinion after spending more time with Johnny was molten in regards to Kreese.

He wanted to throw a party in the worst possible taste.

Confetti maybe.

He was pissed that Kreese had just up and died without any attempt to apologize.

Just some sad "he was going to", like how did that guy even know that?

Maybe he just told his friends and teacher he was going to apologize because he had no other option. Then he just didn't.

The guy had said he was there to help him apologize. Who the hell needed help apologizing?

Like he felt bad the guy came all the way to LA just for his friend to be dead. Like that sucked. But Kreese wasn't a good teacher.

The door opened and students poured out, talking and chatting.

He spotted Bobby amongst a group of girls and rushed through the crowd.

"Daniel!" Bobby said holding out his arms for a hug.

Daniel hugged him. The sugary smell he usually had faded to just shampoo. Daniel kind of missed it.

"Dude, what are you doing here? Oh, yeah, I'll see you later, still on for that study date?" Bobby said turning mid-conversation to talk to the girls who dispersed with waves.

"Can we sit somewhere and talk?"

"Sure," Bobby said arm over his shoulder leading him towards the dorms.

He talked easily about the school, which helped.

Talked about the guys. UCLA wasn't even that far. But with their class schedules and the fact they'd all decided some stupid challenge to have morning classes they were usually unable to party. Wanting to actually get good grades. They'd promised themselves whoever got the best grades would get a free steak dinner from the others and they took their challenges seriously.

Bobby opened the door to his room and motioned towards a chair that Daniel sat down in while Bobby sunk on the bed looking at him.

"Okay Daniel, what's happening. Tommy mentioned something's been happening back home but didn't have time to get into it because he had a class that's already thrown a research paper at them."

"A guy came by today and said he knew Kreese."

Bobby leaned forward, eyes wide.

"Oh fuck, are you okay? Is everyone okay? Was Johnny there?"

He jumped up grabbing his keys and his jacket.

Daniel grabbed the edge of his shirt and tilted his head back towards the bed.

Bobby slowly sat back down.

"He said they served together and that he had come from South Korea to help Kreese apologize."

Bobby's face wrinkled in confusion.

"Apologize? Kreese? That's against his whole M.O."

"He said that Kreese was heartbroken over the loss of his students."

Bobby laughed.

"You're joking, right? Kreese, *heartbroken* over us leaving? He tried to fucking kill Johnny. Are you sure this guy wasn't stoned out of his gourd? The guy has no remorse. If he was going to apologize it should've been to Johnny first *then* you. He owes all of us an apology. Bastard can rot in hell for all I fucking care."

"Well according to him your wish might be true."

Bobby stared at him.

"What?"

"He said Kreese is dead."

"No. Fucking. Way." Bobby said getting up. He paced the room, stopping occasionally hand out to say something then bringing it back in and turning again. Continuing to pace. "Jimmy would know for sure," he said after a while. "Because of the lawsuit." He paused again. "Did you tell Johnny?"

"No, we, Mr. Miyagi and I finished our practice and I came straight here. I don't know how to tell him. Mr. Miyagi said he wouldn't yet. I figured you would know. I didn't know any redeeming factor for Kreese. I can't be sympathetic. I don't think I'd be a good person for him to hear it from."

Bobby nodded sitting back down.

"Okay, we find Jimmy and we ask if he knows. We don't tell Johnny

until we've got a notarized death certificate in hand and are standing over a freshly dug grave. Hell, I might try and dig it up just to check."

Bobby buried his head in his hands.

"There's no way he's fucking dead." He looked back up at Daniel. "I meet Tommy and Jimmy for lunch usually. Do you want to hang around until then? Or do you have to get back? Want to catch me up on all the stuff happening? Tommy mentioned something but he didn't go too deep into it. Some guys giving you trouble?"

"Yeah," Daniel said pulling his feet up under him. He told him about Mike Barnes and the All-Valley paperwork feeling like maybe next time he'd just get all the guys on one phone call and pull Johnny into the room so he could tell everyone at once. He was tired of repeating it. It seemed like nothing now. Not in light of Kreese being dead. Like an annoying gnat in the background.

"Daniel, did you like steal a mummified paw as a kid and wish for like an adventurous life or something?" Bobby asked.

"No, who would wish for this?"

"I'm out here in college trying to figure out who I am. Which is, by the way, like a whole freshman course we all have to take to figure out our *identity* and you're out here being like a scooby doo character where like every time I feel like I turn around you've got some new villain popping up. Tommy might be a little jealous actually. A whole bunch of weird mysteries dropped into your lap and he's also having to sit through the same class to figure out his identity. Who usually is the villain? Old Man Jenkins I think. Daniel, have you pissed off Old Man Jenkins?"

"Laugh all you want, but I beat the last two," Daniel said.

"You did," Bobby said with a nod. "But the difference between the last two is pretty steep and it sounds like this one's even steeper. I do not want to meet the next guy. We need to find you repellant or something."

"Well Mr. College guy, while we wait for lunch how about you show me around? You guys made it seem like such a big deal, we packed you all up, but you're like only a half-hour away," Daniel said. "I thought UCLA was like *hours* away. Why are you guys even staying on campus?"

Bobby put on his jacket and grabbed his keys and wallet and held the door open.

"Well, I wanted to stay in the dorms. Before Kreese showed his hand I thought it might be nice to join a fraternity. I mean Cobra Kai kind of felt like one. I thought it'd be nice to have another one. But I don't want to go anywhere near one now. The *sororities* on the other hand, apparently the fact I know how to bake is like a welcome breath of fresh air. There's apparently a bake sale season and I've been enlisted by almost every sorority on campus. I joked they might have to make me an honorary sister and they actually took that seriously. So life's going to get a little weird when they start having events. Don't tell the guys that part, I didn't mention that. I will not live that down. But it means a lot of cool shit. They go on all these trips and they have all these speakers come. On top of that, they do this business training and apparently having a guy around kind of helps with some of it? I don't know but like the head of the house was talking like a mile a minute and I lost half of it. I just know I'm baking and then invited on like trips...which sounds like more than it is. I think I became the equivalent of a water boy," Bobby said with a laugh. "But I don't mind."

They walked around the quad for awhile until it was lunchtime and Bobby bought Daniel lunch and headed to a table in the busy cafeteria, saying hi to a few people as they passed until Tommy and Jimmy sat down, looking at Daniel shocked.

"What are you doing here?"

"Is everything okay?"

Bobby leaned forward voice low.

"Some guy showed up at the Miyagi house and told Daniel and Mr. Miyagi, Johnny wasn't there before you ask, that Kreese *died*."

"What?" Tommy cried. "How?"

"The hell?" Jimmy said turning to his bag pulling out a big binder.

"Yeah, the guy said Kreese was going to come by and apologize to Daniel and Mr. Miyagi but died of a broken heart first."

"A broken heart?" Jimmy scoffed.

"Well not exactly," Daniel said, trying to remember what guy had said

exactly. He'd been a little too shocked for it to settle into his head on how *exactly* Kreese had died.

"There's no fucking way," Jimmy said. "Did he give you a date or time of death? If he was all cut up about it then maybe he shouldn't have tried to murder Johnny. Guys probably trying to lay the groundwork to fake his death." Jimmy pulled his pen cap off of his pen with his teeth and made a note in his binder. "I'll check though. Timing is super suspicious."

"The guy seemed pretty upset about it," Daniel said.

"Well there are ways to make it seem like you died but didn't actually," Tommy said. "Kind of like what Juliet used in Romeo and Juliet. And a lot of other things. It's possible that he did fake his death and this guy didn't know, actually came home and found his friend seemingly dead."

"That's a lot of work Tommy," Jimmy said with a frown. "Kreese lost it when a minor lost a tournament. He's not cunning enough. Daniel, we're coming up this weekend, you be careful until then okay? Keep Dutch and Johnny close. Something fishy has to be happening."

"Johnny and Dutch are currently getting All-Valley tournament info from last year to try and find a connection or a reason for why Mike Barnes is after me."

Tommy nodded. "That's a good idea. Hey while you're here we should do something fun. The pier is nearby, so is the Getty. What do you want to do?"

"Seriously Tommy? Just rub it in our faces that your classes are done for the day," Bobby groaned.

"Hey, not my fault you hate your freshman class."

"You hate yours too!"

"Did Bobby explain the point of it?" Jimmy asked taking a sip of his soda and leaning back amused as the two complained about their class.

"Identity?"

"Yup. It's breaking our brains. Because *who are we?* What does that even *mean*? We're having to dissect who we are now and present it to

the class in little sections and it fucking sucks. There are a couple thousand kids in every class so it feels impersonal. So we're looking forward to this weekend."

"This weekend?"

"Well, Johnny's birthday is next Tuesday. So we're coming up to celebrate this weekend. Thought you might appreciate us not taking up your room on the actual day. I got these two idiots to agree, but Dutch is a wild card since he's not in school. So good luck with that one," Jimmy said.

Daniel hadn't forgotten about Johnny's birthday. Just maybe that morning and yesterday and maybe the last week.

He had Johnny's gift, he just had to have time alone to put things together. And he was running out of time, which was stressful.

Maybe he should turn around and go home. Work on it while Johnny and Dutch were visiting the All-Valley offices.

"I can't actually stay," Daniel said putting his things on his tray. "I'll see you this weekend. Good luck with your classes. Thanks for lunch and for checking on Kreese."

Jimmy laughed softly while the other two looked up at him with concern.

"Did we say something?" he heard Bobby ask.

"Nah man, I reminded him how soon Johnny's birthday is. Any good boyfriend would bolt after that," Jimmy said with a laugh.

Daniel hurried out of the cafeteria and looked around trying to remember which way to his car.

The plus of it being yellow was that it was always easy to spot.

There it was.

He sped walked at the quick pace of a new yorker dodging around students moseying around.

He hoped he still had time.

It shouldn't take too long, but Daniel didn't have much free time. There wasn't a lot of time to himself.

He hoped Johnny liked it. He *knew* Johnny would like it. But he hoped Johnny liked it *more* because of Daniel.

He hopped in the Ford and drove back to Reseda hoping Johnny was still out with Dutch.

Chapter End Notes

> So the 442nd fought in "the European Theatre, in particular Italy, southern France, and Germany." according to Wikipedia. (not everyone's favorite source, but so very useful.)

Daydreams

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dutch tried to argue that they should take the van because it was less conspicuous.

Johnny said they weren't hiding or on a stakeout. He was going to walk in and ask Mrs. Douglas for last year's tournament information. He'd competed in it. He'd gotten to the finals, it should be easy. Plus he knew Mrs. Douglas.

If only he could get Dutch to calm down as he sat in the Avanti.

Dutch needed a distraction. He was too coiled for a fight. Ready to strike. It was all in his body language and it was too much for something simple.

"Tell me about Taekwondo," Johnny said.

Dutch looked at him suspiciously. But Johnny knew, even if he said he was fine with the guys being at school and Daniel and Johnny doing their own thing, even if he said Taekwondo was keeping him plenty busy it didn't mean that Dutch wasn't lonely.

Dutch was almost as lonely as Johnny had been.

His parents were almost never home. And the staff just cleaned. It wasn't like some magical Mary Poppins story.

Dutch had become a little feral from not having people around.

His parents hadn't put two and two together, just had said once to Johnny that they were glad he no longer was a biter.

He had made other friends in school, was a lot of fun, but that core loneliness was always there.

Dutch talked.

He liked to talk because he didn't have a lot of people to listen to him, so when he got the chance he was a waterfall.

Johnny listened as he drove, asking questions, comparing the two in

his head, taekwondo, and karate, trying to picture it.

When they got to the All-Valley offices Dutch was trying to get him to spar.

Johnny was wearing down.

It sounded like fun. But they didn't have a place that was safe to try it.

There was no way he was sparring with Dutch at Mr. Miyagi's. They would break something for sure.

"If you find a spot other than Mr. Miyagi's then sure," Johnny said.

Dutch grinned, delighted, arm clapping onto Johnny's shoulder.

Johnny walked up to the front desk where Mrs. Douglas sat.

Same as always.

"Hello Mrs. Douglas," Johnny said.

"Oh! Hello Johnny!" she said smiling up at him. "What brings you here? Going to sign up for the All-Valley to try and win back your title?"

Johnny hadn't thought about that. Technically because of his birthday being over the summer, he could try and swing it. He'd have to write an essay if he remembered correctly.

No. Focus. Daniel was already having a rough time.

Plus you had to have a sensei sign off and Mr. Miyagi didn't like tournaments.

"I heard the rules changed and the previous winner only has to fight in the last fight, the finals."

Mrs. Douglas sighed taking off her glasses and rubbing the bridge of her nose.

"Yes. We got a new sponsor. Dynatox. Their CEO asked for some changes in the rules."

"But why?" Johnny asked leaning down, dropping his voice down low.

He knew Mrs. Douglas liked to gossip. Plus she knew everything All-

Valley related.

"I don't know. But so far we have a new entrant who is a little wilder than even you boys," she said leaning forward and whispering back.

"That wouldn't by chance be Mike Barnes would it?"

She grinned slapping Johnny's arm. "Look at you! You have your fingers on the pulse of karate just like I knew you did. Though you," She turned to Dutch. "I heard you defected to taekwondo."

Dutch ducked down to join their little group. "You'll have to come and cheer me on at a Taekwondo tournament and then maybe you'll see why."

"Ooh, Mr. Dutch I'll be expecting an invite now. I will be thoroughly disappointed if I don't see it."

"Will do."

"I was wondering Mrs. Douglas. Could I get a copy of last year's brackets for the tournament? What the lineup ended up being?"

"Of course Johnny!" she said with a grin digging around in her desk. "That really was something you know. Had never seen someone execute such a good crane kick while injured."

"Daniel did quite well," Johnny said.

"*Daniel* huh? When did you move on to first names Johnny?" she asked looking up at him with a curious tilt of her head. "If I remember correctly, and I know I do. You arrived early last year and sat with me and my son and complained the whole time about LaRusso before the rest of your Cobra Kai arrived. About him not being ready, going to get his ass kicked in the first match, probably get injured. And you complained about him when you came to sign up months in advance. It was always LaRusso. Don't tell me our previous champion and our current champion are friends now?"

She looked too happy.

Too delighted.

Johnny had to look away.

He knew he was too easy to read.

Knew he was blushing.

He remembered that.

Mrs. Douglas always brought him frozen grapes to snack on.

She was upset his mom didn't come to the fights and took over like it was her job.

He knew he wasn't the only one she did that with, but he liked her.

She was friendly, one of the reasons why he liked fighting at the All-Valley more than the other competitions.

Dutch leaned back in.

"They're at the same dojo now."

"Oh Miyagi-do?" she asked with a little gasp. "Oh, how exciting! You know," she said digging around. "We were expecting not to have Cobra Kai competing this year but they've signed up."

Johnny felt his veins freeze turning back to look at her.

"Under Kreese?" he asked softly.

"It doesn't say yet. But I assume so. They've only asked for a few spots instead of their like ten," she said looking at her paperwork with a frown before closing the book and grabbing the paper she found with a bright grin handing it over to Johnny. "Here you go," she said. "Last year's tournament details. Something specific I can help you with?"

"Mrs. Douglas, do you know why Daniel was invited this year?"

"He's last year's champion," she said with a frown like that should've been obvious.

"His birthday's in December. He turned 18 last year," Johnny said holding the paper in front of him studying the names, Dutch looking over his shoulder.

"That can't be right," she said with a frown digging around in her desk again and pulling out a piece of paper. "This says he's 16, wait," she held it close squinting. "Someone erased part of the 8."

"He graduated *with* us Mrs. Douglas," Dutch said.

"That's strange, who would've erased that?"

"I think something fishy might be happening Mrs. Douglas," Johnny said. "Mike Barnes been coming in person to try and get Daniel to compete."

"Well that's not okay," Mrs. Douglas said with a frown.

She grabbed a pink highlighter.

"Our competitors are supposed to *only* fight in the ring. Not supposed to harass each other."

She marked something in her booklet.

"Thank you for letting me know Johnny, Mr. Dutch. I'll keep an eye on things here. Try and figure out who erased that number."

"Can I keep this?" Johnny asked.

"Of course," she said warmly.

"Thank you Mrs. Douglas," Johnny said folding it up and turning.

"Mr. Dutch please do not forget my invite," Mrs. Douglas called.

"Of course!" he called back.

In the Avanti, Johnny looked over the tournament line up again with a frown.

"I don't see any Barnes."

"Me either," Dutch said pulling a notebook out of his jacket and a pen.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking notes, Tommy will kill me if I forget anything."

Johnny laughed handing the paper to Dutch and driving back towards Mr. Miyagi's.

"Hey," Dutch said without looking up as he scribbled his notes. "Let's go to the park to spar."

"Really?"

"Yeah, Daniel's probably at the shop anyway. We can stop by after.

Grab lunch."

"Okay, sure."

"Hell yes!" Dutch said flipping the notebook away and putting it away with the lineup.

Johnny smiled, turning down the road out to the park.

Maybe August was just sparring month. Everyone wanted to spar. Maybe they missed it.

He had.

Dutch hopped out of the car bouncing on his feet warming up. Johnny had to admit he was curious about the difference, to see what Dutch was learning that he was so much better at.

"I think you'd like taekwondo," Dutch said. "But you'll see."

He bounced a little more and then fell into his stance, waiting, ready.

It was different, his weight was on his back leg, putting more distance between them, and then Johnny learned why as Dutch kicked.

Johnny blocked.

So much kicking.

Johnny knew he was smiling.

Karate used kicking as a backup, and Johnny liked kicking, liked spinning high kicks, no wonder Dutch had been dying to show him. He *was* better at it.

He was so used to mirroring Daniel, reading Daniel, and following him or Mr. Miyagi that it was hard to not kick back, trying to absorb Dutch's new fighting technique.

Dutch did so many spins, so many jumps, his feet barely touching the ground.

It was so different that Johnny had a hard time reading it, losing ground as they went.

"Damn Dutch," Johnny said when they both collapsed on the ground to catch their breath.

Dutch tilted his head back in the grass grinning.

"Fucking light on your feet now huh?" Johnny asked. "How the hell?"

"A lot of fucking practice," Dutch said smiling. "My tournament is next month."

"I'll be there. Just give me the details."

"I will," Dutch said. "Things going well with Daniel?"

"Yeah."

Dutch's hand reached out and poked his neck. "Clearly," he said with a laugh.

Johnny frowned covering his neck with his hand.

"I'm glad you two are doing well, happy for you man," Dutch said.

"I'm glad Taekwondo is going well, that you've found something you like," Johnny said.

"I didn't think I would," Dutch said. "I thought all the guys would go to school and you would be sent off to somewhere by Sid. I figured we'd meet up you know, but this is...it's better, nicer. Nice is weird man. Very fucking weird. I don't know what to do with it."

"Me either," Johnny said.

Johnny hadn't ever let himself hope for good, or nice. Just one foot in front of the other.

He assumed Dutch had a better grasp of things, had more hope or plans for the future. Even if it was something simple like just have a good time. But it sounded like he'd decided to carve his own path and was excited for his future. For the possibilities, he hadn't even known were there and Johnny had a similar feeling.

He liked the idea of going to Mr. Miyagi's Little Tree's and helping Mr. Miyagi take care of bonsai while Daniel chatted with customers.

He liked the idea of going home and cooking and eating together around a table in a cozy way where the conversation happened.

He liked the idea that a couple of times a week he'd get in the Avanti and meet his mother at her place. Spend a night here and there and

help her plant the garden or around the house. Sit in the living room and read together on the couch or watch TV.

It didn't seem like big dreams but they were more than he'd ever had before.

Hope for a nice peaceful future.

Johnny laughed and Dutch rolled over looking at him.

"Sorry, I just realized something. That as peaceful and quiet as I kind of dream about it might never be possible."

"What do you mean?" Dutch asked with a frown.

"One of the first times I really pissed off Daniel was telling him I was worried his knee would slow him down when he got himself into trouble, because trouble *always* finds him. It was an unfortunate observation that I hoped would go away, but it's *true*. Like we've poured all over that tournament register and there isn't a single Barnes on it. Yet a random stranger has shown up to decide to threaten him.

"I'm going to be like 70 and I'm going to be sitting in some chair reading some book and he's going to come in and tell me about some fight he got into with some random other old guy at the grocery store because he said all kinds of pasta are the same or something and Daniel tried to explain it or something and it starts a fight. Because you'd think I'd be around when he gets into fights or is threatened right? Well, it was like every time I turned my back in Okinawa that was when Chozen bothered him. I only got to interfere *once* and I was in the damn bath when I heard a fight happening. And you'd think oh I'm an award-winning karate fighter, but no, dislocated my shoulder because Chozen wanted to fight with *spears*. Like who does that? Right? So maybe I am going to have my quiet life or I'm going to have to get faster at like jumping out of the bath."

"Or you could just follow Daniel around everywhere," Dutch said.

"I did think about that but then realized it probably wasn't a good idea. Though maybe I should just accept I might be 70 and getting into fights still but at the grocery store."

Dutch laughed sitting up. "What a rough life you live. Where your future daydreams are *I get in fights at the grocery store as an old man with my boyfriend.* Come on old man let's go get some food," Dutch said getting up and pulling Johnny up with him.

"Okay, well what about yours?" Johnny asked walking over the Avanti.

Dutch sat down in the passenger seat and looked thoughtful. "Well not all of us jump straight to the prime of our lives *at 70* in our daydreams," he said with a laugh. "But I did find this poster of Seoul that I've tacked up on my wall. I think I'd like to go. Maybe live there for a while and study there."

"Have you gotten to try the food?"

"It's delightfully spicy," Dutch said with a grin. "Let's get some for lunch."

"Do you know a place?" Johnny asked.

"I do."

Dutch gave him directions as he drove, interspersing it into the conversation about his classes, the language class he was taking, how tournament preparation was different when Kreese wasn't in charge and how much calmer it was. Which was kind of funny because everyone else was nervous but because there wasn't some guy yelling at him trying to get everyone worked up into a frenzy it felt suspiciously easy.

Johnny parked the Avanti and followed Dutch through the doors to a table.

Dutch ordered for them which was a relief as he was handed a pair of flat metal chopsticks and a spoon.

They were brought a bunch of tiny dishes, their table slowly filling up and Johnny looked at each one then up at Dutch who looked absolutely delighted.

A hot black bowl was set in front of Johnny and across from him, Dutch was given what looked like orangeish red rice. Both had a fried egg on top.

"I ordered you bibimbap, it's rice with veggies and meat," Dutch explained.

"And this?" Johnny motioned to the plethora of tiny dishes.

"Side dishes."

"Side dishes? All of these, for yours or for mine?"

"For the table man."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, this one's kimchi try it," Dutch said tapping one of the dishes.

Johnny tried everything. Tofu, little tiny fish, tiny eggs, fish cake, spinach, and potatoes.

Dutch explained what he knew while he ate his kimchi fried rice, talking excitedly about what he had learned from his teacher.

It was so vastly different from Cobra Kai.

No bad guys lurking around every corner that you had to defend against and then defeat before they tried to kill you.

His class had a bunch of teachers in it at different levels. All the way from little kids who came in after school to people older than Dutch. He'd found a community and Johnny was happy for him.

They drove to the shop after lunch.

Dutch was skeptical.

Still a little upset about the spiderwebs.

Johnny had to promise multiple times that he had scrubbed the place from floor to ceiling. That he'd gotten every single one, unless spiders had come back the day before and worked at an intense schedule, he doubted Dutch would walk through another web.

The truck was out front and they walked in.

Mr. Miyagi was working on his trees.

Dutch walked around with his hands shoved in his pockets looking for spiderwebs with suspicion.

"Anything we can help with Mr. Miyagi?" Johnny asked.

"Pick up dirt," Mr. Miyagi said pointing to a wooden piece of furniture with slots. "Put order in at shop."

Mr. Miyagi got out a receipt and then handed over his keys. "Take

truck, too messy for nice car."

"Thank you Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said taking the keys and the receipt.

Dutch followed him out to the truck.

"It looks better," Dutch said as Johnny drove.

"I told you," Johnny said with a smile. "I cleaned every inch of that place."

"You do realize it's a plant shop. It's just going to be full of dirt." Dutch said.

"I know that. But that's going to be *our* dirt, not some random other dirt."

"Our dirt huh? Do Mr. Miyagi and Daniel know that you've thrown yourself into their plans?"

"I'm just helping."

"Uh-huh, sure. Is it because your mom won in the divorce settlement?"

"It helps, but I would've done all this anyway. I just would've also found a job on the side. Now I don't have to."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. Plus I told her I want to help out with the shop. So I'm getting an allowance. Just in case everything is slow for a while. She was super upset to know I had an emergency fund and then blew through it. Though she agrees with each thing I bought."

"You realize she's probably more upset that you *had* an emergency fund than you spending it."

Johnny frowned, he hadn't thought about it that way.

"Your Mom isn't like Sid," Dutch said. "She cares more that you're okay and that you're safe. Plus you guys had nothing for a while, of course, she's giving you an allowance when she can because it probably scared the shit out of her to realize you'd gone to Okinawa without any money in your pocket if there'd been an emergency. All you had was a damn phone card. And then you got hurt while you were there and kept getting into fights and there was a bad storm that knocked half the village down. Of fucking course she got upset. Hell, my

parents are always checking on my funds to make sure I've got enough. It's like how they know I'm alive when they're gone for long stints. I'm spending money on food and gas and shit."

Johnny nodded parking the truck. He hadn't thought about it like that. Sid had made it always sound like spending his money was one of the worst things Johnny could do, so he didn't do it much. Didn't ever ask for much. His mother was clearly trying to change that. To try and make up for lost time.

"She found my childhood bear," Johnny said pushing the door to the shop open.

"Oh man I gotta see that," Dutch said with a laugh.

"I think she kept everything. I don't know how. But she did. I thought Sid made her throw it all out, but it seems like she didn't."

"Smart lady," Dutch said with a grin.

Johnny handed the receipt over to a worker who nodded and motioned towards a pile of large bags.

"You know, I'm glad I don't dress up to see you guys," Dutch said. "I'm going to have to make it a rule though to not wear clothes I actually like when I visit you specifically again."

"Huh?" Johnny asked scooping up a bag and hauling it over his shoulder and carrying it out to the truck.

Dutch following suit.

"Well, when we were younger I didn't wear clothes I liked cause I was worried I'd get blood on them. You know all the fighting with Cobra Kai and shit. And then we quit and I started wearing all the shit I liked. Well, I'm doing free labor with *dirt* involved. I gotta go back to my old habits man. Life around you is always messy for a guy who used to live in the Hills."

"I used to live a little bit of everywhere," Johnny said setting the bag down in the back of the truck and walking back into the shop to get the next one.

"I know, but you clean up nice man. That well-trained country club kid. So like just looking at you I wouldn't have realized how much I'd be handling actual fucking dirt," Dutch said with a laugh, throwing

the next bag over his shoulder.

"Do you need to send me your dry cleaning bill?" Johnny asked.

"You cannot afford it even on your Mom's allowance," Dutch said. "Even my boring ass t-shirts are designer."

"You know you can buy cheaper clothes right? Like actually have normal clothes."

"I know," Dutch said. "But it's kinda like, oh what's it called, an artistic statement or something? Some tightly wound rich kid would take one look at my closet and cry if they saw the labels and then saw the amount of dirt I dragged my clothes through."

"So then what are you complaining about?"

"That looks can be deceiving."

"That is an understatement."

They had moved most of the pile and were on the last ones. Dutch gently elbowed Johnny and Johnny turned at the door to see that they'd had an audience.

"Thanks for setting these aside for us. It's for a bonsai shop that's opening up soon. Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees," Johnny said. "Hope to see you there."

He caught Dutch wink as he turned back around at the group of people as Johnny walked back out and dumped the last of it into the back of the truck.

"Okay I renege everything," Dutch said.

"What do you mean?" Johnny asked.

"I'm going to hang around with you more."

"Again, what?" Johnny asked starting up the truck.

"I forgot babes love that shit. Carrying heavy shit. Manual labor. Your shop might actually attract ladies. I thought it was a shot in the dark because it's LaRusso and Mr. Miyagi right? I figured your whole client base would be tumbleweed and little old ladies and the occasional person who got lost. But this is fucking LA. If those get popular then your shops going to get swamped like a restaurant with the newest

trendy health food."

"You got that much hope for us now?" Johnny asked amused.

"You really put blinders on when you like someone huh?" Dutch said with an amused smile. "Daniel should've never fucking worried as much as I heard he did from Ali."

"You talked to Ali? You two hate each other."

"I don't hate her."

Johnny gave him a look when they stopped at a red light.

"Okay, so she's never been, my favorite person. But she came to the courthouse for a couple of days to give her piece right? So we saw a lot of each other. Tommy dragged us all out to get like coffees and shit and then when you got back from Okinawa and we found out you guys were dating Tommy made us all meet up again before they all went off to school and we got shitfaced. Turned out she knew Daniel liked you. We swapped wingman stories. So apparently Daniel kept stressing about the girls right? That kept flooding your locker and kept trying to walk you to classes like you were some feeble grandmother. So after she learned Daniel liked you that's when you got put back on that banned list. Tommy was so frustrated by the whole thing. They got into a little fight, it was kind of cute. There was no bite to it, they were both so damn drunk. But it was like a little kid fight right? Hilarious. But like you were too focused on Daniel to realize right? And then dude, totally didn't clock any of the hotties in that shop."

"I've got what I want," Johnny said parking in front of the shop.

"Well I'm going to tell Daniel that he can expect a bunch of girls to show up because we carried dirt around, I want to see his face."

"Don't tease Daniel," Johnny said.

"It's not teasing."

"I'm pretty sure it *is* teasing."

Johnny got one of the bags and walked up the steps into the shop.

"We're back Mr. Miyagi. What do you want us to do with the dirt?"

Mr. Miyagi set his shears down and got up. "Thank you! Separate types separate spots," he said motioning to the different slots.

"Got it," Johnny said reading the bag he was holding.

Akadama: red ball earth he poured it in the one on the left.

"Dutch this one's the red ball earth," he said looking around and grabbing scissors to cut off the label and then taped it to the front.

"This ones," Dutch said squinting, "Pumice, hey ain't that a rock?"

"Hai," Mr. Miyagi said. "Good for bonsai."

"Okay got it," Dutch said dumping it into the next one, taking the scissors from Johnny and cutting off the label, and taping it.

They worked through the rest. Bringing in soil, tiny gravel, and lava rock along with more of what they'd already brought in.

"Damn I didn't know so much shit went into those tiny pots," Dutch said after opening the last bag of dirt and dumping it into the trough.

Mr. Miyagi nodded. "We mix in shop."

"Smart," Dutch said walking over to the sink and washing off his hands. "That's going to be cool. Oh hey!"

Johnny turned to see Jessica wearing her apron and covered in drying flecks of clay on her hands and arms.

"Thought I'd just pop by and check to see if this is the design you all wanted," Jessica said holding a small piece of clay in her hands.

Mr. Miyagi got up and walked over peering at the piece in her hands. He smiled warmly.

"Beautiful."

"Thank you Mr. Miyagi," she said beaming.

Dutch followed Johnny over, looking at the bonsai design.

"Daniel said he wanted something like this on pots. What do you think Johnny?"

"It's great," Johnny said.

"Yeah, very cool. I'm Dutch by the way," Dutch said leaning against Johnny, arm around his shoulder and holding out his other hand.

She carefully shifted her little design into her other hand and held hers out to shake his hand but stopped mid-reach, her hand covered in clay, hesitating.

"No worries, I just lugged in a bunch of dirt and organized it, dirt and clay are not a problem."

She smiled shaking his hand. "Jessica Andrews."

"Nice to meet you, you work at the shop across the street?"

"Yes, do you work here?"

"No, just free labor," Dutch said with a laugh.

"I'm almost in the same boat. I work for my aunt. Anyway. I'm glad you like the design, I will go finish a pot so hopefully, it'll be ready soon and you, Mr. Miyagi can tell me if you like it, or Daniel can," she said turning.

"Wait, what are you doing this weekend?" Dutch called.

"She's got a boyfriend," Johnny whispered quickly in Dutch's ear.

"Oh, uh, nothing, why?" she asked looking back.

"We're celebrating Johnny's birthday this weekend. Our friends are coming up from UCLA, you should come to hang out."

"That sounds like fun, just let me know the details. I'll be there," Jessica said with a smile before leaving.

"What part of she has a boyfriend did you not get?" Johnny asked.

Dutch held up his hands and put an innocent look on his face. "She looked lonely. Besides last I checked your birthday party is like 99% guys, the 1% is *your mom*. We need some variety just to behave."

"Invite Bobby's little siblings then."

"Not that kind of variety man."

"If you know the party is going to be mostly guys why would you invite only *one* girl?" Johnny asked. "Isn't she going to be uncomfortable? She doesn't know us that well and she doesn't know the guys."

"It's not my fault you haven't made more lady friends," Dutch said. "Meet more girls and then this won't be a problem."

"In a few days? Dutch that's impossible."

"You know very well that Bobby and the guys are going to be gentlemen, they're well trained, it's fine. She cannot spend this weekend alone in the shop across the street while we're out partying. I won't hear of it."

Dutch had his arms crossed across his chest and was trying to look like he was putting his foot down but there was that mischief in his eyes Johnny knew too well.

"Be nice Dutch, we're friends and trying to set up a working relationship here. "

He grinned. "It will be *fine*. Actually," Dutch said looking at the clock. "I gotta go man, take me back to Mr. Miyagi's. I gotta class I gotta prep for."

"Okay. Mr. Miyagi, I'm going to take Dutch back to the house so he can get the van."

"Hai," Mr. Miyagi said as he worked on his bonsai, focused, waving a hand in their general direction.

Johnny followed Dutch back out to the Avanti, getting in and turning around towards the tracks.

He could hear a train in the distance and then there was a familiar yellow Ford coming towards them, crossing over.

"I'm going to do do something stupid," Johnny said, looking around.

There were no other cars. He waited and the Ford parked. He eased forward pulling as close as he could and then put his foot gently on the brake trying to get right where he wanted to be as slowly and carefully as possible.

The window was down. The Ford was off, parked.

"Hold the wheel will you?" Johnny said to Dutch, twisting pushing himself up and over, keeping one foot on the brake

"What are you doing?" Daniel asked with a laugh.

"Taking Dutch home," Johnny said leaning over.

"You know that's not what I meant," Daniel said amused leaning out of the window of the Ford.

"I know," Johnny said kissing him.

Johnny didn't pull away until the train passed and the road was clear again. Taking the wheel back from Dutch and pulling away from the Ford and Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees as carefully as he could, raising his hand up and waving to Daniel who he saw through the rearview mirror wave back.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of food in this one because of side dishes.
Main Recipes:
Bibimbap
Kimchi fried rice recipe
Side dish Recipes:
Tofu aka Dubu Buchim
Little fish aka Myulchi Bokkeum
tiny eggs aka Jangjorim
fish cake this recipe offers either spicy or non spicy
spinach aka sigumchi namul
Potatoes aka Gamja bokkeum
We're also going to learn about bonsai:
Bonsai soil info You know if you want to read and learn about dirt, there's pictures lol.

Something Old Something New

The rest of the week went by fast working in the shop. Daniel helped set up Shoji screens and built shelves.

Jessica would pop over around lunchtime to see if they all wanted to get lunch together.

She introduced them around the neighborhood to the different shops and restaurants.

There weren't any other plant shops in the area.

Johnny talked easily with the other shop owners who seemed instantly charmed by him. Something about him being from around the area seemed to break down barriers and he'd talk about what he remembered and they loved it, catching him up on all the changes. They were curious about Daniel and Mr. Miyagi and Daniel took over there, talking about the trees and Mr. Miyagi and himself.

They all promised to check it out on the opening day and Daniel felt good about it.

Johnny always handed them one of the printed posters.

"They really like you guys," Jessica said with a grin. "I haven't really talked to them before, my aunt does. So I know them but I haven't gotten to *know* them you know?"

"Yeah," Daniel said with a smile.

So far there'd been no more Mike Barnes or his friend. Things were good. And he'd finished Johnny's gift.

Which felt a bit like a fake gift. But he'd put several hours into it so he was claiming it as a gift.

"I heard Johnny's birthday is this weekend. Your friend Dutch invited me, is that okay?"

"Was Johnny there?" Daniel asked.

"Yes."

"Then of course. It's Johnny's birthday. Though most of our friends are

guys, just as a heads up. So it'll probably be mostly guys and like his mom."

"That's fine," Jessica said.

"We'll make sure the guys behave."

She laughed.

Daniel remembered Johnny saying the same thing to him once. It seemed so long ago.

They had Johnny's birthday at his mom's house in the garden. She'd had a few new trees planted since Daniel had last been by.

They had arrived early. Ms. Lawrence met them at the gate.

There was a table set out and a piñata. A familiar-looking elderly woman and a younger woman were walking around talking.

Ms. Lawrence grinned.

"Your abulea heard it was your birthday and brought a piñata and cooked more food than I know what to do with. She kind of took over. Her granddaughter came as well. Your cousin I guess? My niece? That's kind of fun. I like that," she told Johnny pulling him into a hug.

Daniel had brought his gift, he'd been a little unsure whether to bring it now, or give it to Johnny later.

It felt a little weird to carry it around, so it was in the trunk.

He didn't know what he'd be asked to do, but he expected he'd be put to work, and that was fine.

He'd thought he might cook, but it looks like Abulea had already taken care of that. Maybe he'd cook for Johnny on the actual day.

Ms. Lawrence was talking softly to Mr. Miyagi gently letting go of Johnny and patting Daniel on the shoulder as he passed. A gentle squeeze.

He noticed a box on a table, there was something familiar about the handwriting and he walked over while Johnny greeted Abulea and her granddaughter.

He was right.

His mother said she was sending something in one of their calls, but it'd just been a little blip between a whole bunch of other updates about his uncle and cousin, aunts and grandparents, and the rest of his family.

Being in Jersey meant she had *all* the information. Knew how all his younger cousins' classes were going, his aunts and uncle's jobs and marriages, it was just a constant deluge.

He knew more about family members than he wanted to. But he knew it was because his Mom missed him that she was trying to catch him up on everything. He was pretty sure he told her about the most inane stuff as well. About the shop, which she'd been mad about but had warmed up to after he talked her through his plan.

She wasn't 100% on board, still miffed he'd lied in her opinion, withheld information was what he thought instead, but she was getting there.

She asked how it was having Johnny helping out and reminded him that at some point they'd have to sit down and figure out how much to pay him because it wouldn't be fair otherwise. And Daniel *knew* that. He hadn't planned to keep Johnny on as unpaid labor.

He didn't want to be *another* person taking advantage of him.

Johnny already was babysitting for free and volunteering at the animal shelter. And when stuff needed to be done around the house he did it. But it was in one of those awkward zones, like the fact they didn't pay rent so how much did they actually owe Mr. Miyagi in free labor, cooking and cleaning and running errands? Nothing had been said, they just did it. It was working so far. But he knew his mother didn't like it.

It was just an uncomfortable conversation.

He hadn't even asked if Johnny *did* want to work at the shop. He thought he did. But thinking he did clearly was a hole he kept falling into and then he'd realize Johnny was in a different one just as confused.

Daniel resolved that once the shop opened he'd ask.

He never told or asked Johnny to be at the shop, or help out, Johnny

just showed up and helped. Asked what he could do to help. But Daniel wanted to make sure Johnny knew he didn't have to. Only if he wanted to. Because now was the first time Johnny could do what he wanted and Daniel didn't want to put him in a low-paying manual labor job just because they were dating, or because they lived together. But he liked the idea of all of them being in the same shop. Of getting to spend more time together.

He'd have to work on keeping his hands to himself though. Another weird gray area they'd have to work out and talk about.

There were a lot of gray areas, a lot of conversations they'd have to have. But right now he was dying to know what his mother had sent from Jersey for Johnny.

He forced himself to walk away, to walk over to Johnny and to wrap an arm around him and to meet Abulea's granddaughter. Gabriela also apparently went to UCLA, she was talking about her studies, some sort of science it sounded like, her abulea was beaming and Johnny was asking her questions about her thesis.

Daniel heard a car and turned to see Jessica Andrews. He hurried over to introduce her to Johnny's mother. She had a gift in her hands looking around taking everything in. The decorations, the lights.

"It's so pretty," Jessica said softly when Daniel got over.

"Thank you," Ms. Lawrence said.

"Jessica Andrews, this is Ms. Lawrence, Johnny's mother. Jessica works at the ceramic shop across the street. She's in town until after Thanksgiving."

"Nice to meet you," Jessica said carefully moving her gift to shake Ms. Lawrence's hand.

"Thank you for coming." Ms. Lawrence said with a smile. "It's all still a work in progress, but I'm glad you like it."

Daniel walked with her to the gift table where she set her gift down.

"This says LaRusso," Jessica said pointing at the package on the table and looking at Daniel with an eyebrow raised.

"Yeah, my Mom sent it. I'm dying to know what she sent."

"You don't know?"

"I don't. I guess it's weird. For someone's mother to send something for someone else's birthday? But it's not that weird. I mean there's like a reason. I think there is. I'm not really sure. I means she likes Johnny but I think the real reason is because Johnny and I are dating."

"I thought so," Jessica asked with a soft smile.

"How-"

"You hold hands," she said counting off on her fingers. "You put your arm around his waist, and you two kiss. If you weren't dating I'd have been more surprised."

Daniel blushed. When had he kissed Johnny in front of Jessica? Had he got so comfortable he forgot? He would really have to be careful once they opened the shop.

Oh god how bad was he at the house? No wonder Mr. Miyagi was always leaving to fish at the crack of dawn and then to the shop.

"When did we kiss in front of you?" he managed.

"Well our shops are across from each other. Sometimes you will kiss on the steps. Though the first time I saw it, Johnny leaned out of his car to kiss you."

"Yeah, I didn't even think about that."

He'd forgotten how comfortable he'd gotten around their shop. There wasn't a lot of foot traffic or shops nearby and they were still setting up. So they did kiss a lot.

Jessica smiled hooking her arm through his. "So what do you think your Mom sent him?"

"I don't know!" he said. "For my 18th birthday, she made me a cream cake and gave me money for the movies. But that wouldn't have survived the trip. Though it's big enough. There's no way she sent money in that box."

"She's in Jersey right?" Jessica asked.

"Yeah."

"Could that just be full of pizza?"

"No way. It's not greasy enough."

"Moms like to send sweaters. Does your Mom knit?"

"She doesn't have time. She taught me to sew but not knitting."

"Well, now I'm dying to know what's in there."

"Right? I feel like you don't usually show up somewhere and then there's a mystery box for someone else from your own parent."

Jessica laughed. "Wait, where's your gift? Don't tell me your Mom got your boyfriend a gift but you didn't?"

"It's in the trunk of my car," Daniel said. "It's not great."

"No?"

"There's a good chance my own mother's going to upstage me."

"Well I made him a mug," she whispered in his ear. "Did I upstage you?"

"No. Well. Maybe. It's a weird gift," Daniel said frowning.

"You can't do this to me Daniel, you can't leave me with two unsolved mysteries within arms reach. When can we get Johnny to start opening gifts?"

"We're missing four loud guests," Daniel said turning towards the gate.

"The friends from UCLA?"

"Yes. Well except Dutch. He's not in school."

"You know you told me it'd all be guys, but currently there are more women here."

"I was unaware that Gabriela and her abuela were coming," Daniel said spotting two cars pull up with four familiar faces in them.

Bobby was carrying a couple of containers stacked on top of one another and he pushed the hip open with his hip.

"First up is Bobby," Daniel said softly to Jessica.

"What's he got? His hands are full."

"I'm going to bet cake? Pastries? His family owns a couple of bakeries."

Jimmy followed holding a large cooler.

"Jimmy's got the cooler, probably drinks, family owns a couple of bars and I think they do international drink imports and exports? I've never really asked."

"What kind of drinks do you think?"

"International sodas? Beer?" Daniel said with a soft laugh. "There's a fridge at his house just full of drinks."

"A fridge just for drinks?"

"Yup."

Tommy was carrying wrapped gifts and Dutch hurried forward to catch the gate so it didn't hit him. Tommy relaxed, turning to thank Dutch, and headed towards them. "Tommy's I guess got the gifts, and you met Dutch."

"More mystery packages," Jessica said with a laugh.

"Right? It's been so long since I've been to a birthday party. What's the order again? Cake then gifts?" Daniel asked.

"You know I think it's food, gifts then cake," Jessica said.

"No way," Daniel said. "After cake for sure."

"Well here's a question for you then, does the piñata come before or after?" Jessica asked pointing to it.

"Oh, that throws off the entire thing. No clue."

"Hello, Daniel. Jessica Andrews right?" Tommy asked setting down the gifts on the table.

"Yes, nice to meet you, Tommy."

Tommy smiled then looked out across the yard. "This is our first time here. Have you been inside Daniel?"

"Yes, I dropped Johnny off for a dinner and got a tour."

"I'm still waiting for the divorce party/open house," Tommy said.

"She's probably going to wait till the garden's done," Jimmy said passing Tommy a clear glass bottle full of a yellow liquid.

"Jimmy," he said holding a hand out to Jessica.

"Jessica."

"Nice to meet you, help yourself to whatever you want from the cooler. It's full of ice too so everything's nice and cold."

Jessica nodded and pulled Daniel along to look in the cooler.

She let go to open it.

Daniel peered in. There were a lot of the same bright yellow liquid in glass bottles.

He picked one up.

"What is Inca Kola?" she asked grabbing one for herself and shutting the lid.

"No clue. But I'm sure we can find out," he said tapping his glass to hers and twisting off the cap.

"On three?" she asked following suit.

"Yes," he said with a grin.

"Three."

"Two."

"One."

Bubblegum was not the flavor he was expecting from a yellow drink.

"Oh that's a problem," she said with a laugh.

"You don't like it?" Daniel asked.

"No, that's amazing, but like where am I going to find this in Columbus Ohio?" she asked.

"I don't know. Can you petition someone for it?"

"I'm going to have to," Jessica said, then turned to him, dropping her voice low. "So why don't you grab your gift and add it to the pile?" Jessica asked.

"I-"

"He's going to like it I'm sure."

"How do you know that?" Daniel asked.

"Because you're so nervous," she said with a gentle smile. "You care an awful lot, which means you put a lot of effort into it."

"I didn't buy it."

"I didn't buy mine either."

"Yeah but yours is-"

"Daniel," she said putting her hand on his shoulder and looking him sternly in the eyes. "Go get your gift and put it on the table."

"Yeah, okay," Daniel said, letting her turn him around and push him gently back towards the gate.

He walked to his Ford looking at the gift.

His mother was better at wrapping than he was. It looked like a five-year-old had tried to wrap a very patient cat.

It was in a box, but you could barely tell.

He should've opted for a bag. Throw a bit of tissue paper on top and you're done. Easy. But he had the box. And he'd liked the feeling setting it carefully in the box.

The moment he got to hold it in his hands had been weird. So strange. That he'd had to take a moment to just sit there and stare at it. It was such an odd choice that he kept backing out.

He nearly shut the trunk again. But he steeled himself.

He took a deep breath and grabbed the box and shut the trunk and walked back into the garden.

He set it down on the table and joined everyone else to eat.

The food was delicious. The cake Bobby had brought was perfect. And Johnny kept holding his hand, gently squeezing it from time to time. He wondered if that level of nervousness was why Johnny always looked like he was going to bolt. If that was how Johnny had always felt, an overwhelming feeling, a need to just be anywhere else, then Daniel got it.

He wanted to grab the box and put it back in the trunk.

But Johnny was rubbing his thumb over the back of his hand and that was easier to focus on as Ms. Lawrence brought over gifts.

Jessica pushed hers forward first with a warm smile, reassuring to Daniel, like it was fine. But she'd 100% made hers. He hadn't. It wasn't the same.

He didn't pay attention to the other gifts until Johnny picked up the box he'd wrapped.

Daniel wanted to be anywhere else. Let him sink under the table.

How did he explain it? In front of an audience of people?

He should've asked.

What if Johnny didn't like it?

What if he'd fucked up?

What if it'd been a terrible idea?

Too presumptuous?

He had asked Mr. Miyagi. Mr. Miyagi had listened to him talk through it for hours on end. An unending stream throughout the week. Waffling on whether it'd been a good idea or not. Because taste changes. Maybe it wasn't something Johnny would like anymore. Maybe it'd hit him as strongly as it hit Daniel. Maybe that was a bad thing.

They'd done *a lot* of breathing practice.

Johnny opened the box and set aside the lid.

He carefully picked up his red leather jacket staring at the patch, the Miyagi-do design done by Mrs. Miyagi reproduced by the designer in Okinawa where a cobra had once been.

Johnny gently ran his fingers over it.

Daniel had hand-stitched it.

Leather wasn't easy to sew into. A pain in the ass really. But his mother had taught him how to sew, how to sew on practically anything. Something about his cousins throwing out perfectly good clothing because they didn't know how to fix it. He'd never thought that skill would be as useful as it had been.

Johnny turned to him, eyes the color of a perfectly clear summer sky.

"How did you?" he asked softly trailing off.

"I asked the designer in Okinawa. Gave her the design Mrs. Miyagi had made, after asking Mr. Miyagi what he thought. You mentioned in New York you were looking for something to put on it, and I thought, well I thought this was good. I uh- I sewed it on, so it's not going anywhere any time soon."

"It's perfect," Johnny said smiling warmly putting it on.

It was like a missing piece Daniel didn't know he'd been missing.

He hadn't seen Johnny in that jacket in so long that it'd been a completely different guy wearing it the last time he'd seen it. The last time he'd worn it was after the tournament. The night Kreese had tried to kill him.

If Johnny hadn't said he wanted to replace the patch he would've thought Johnny never wanted to see it again. Wouldn't have blamed him. But he had remembered watching Johnny sifting through patches in New York, every gift shop they walked through, even around LA, Johnny had stopped to look.

That smile warmed Daniel's heart, he had picked the right thing and Johnny looked good in his jacket. A little closer to the old Johnny, but better, because this Johnny smiled at him like that.

Birthday

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny had spent part of his week trying to figure out more about Dynatox. There was surprisingly little he could find. The librarians recommended public records. All he got from that was that it was a toxic waste company.

He couldn't find the name of the owner or whoever it was who decided to sponsor the upcoming All-Valley.

He wasn't sure if it was a good lead. After all, rich kids in the Hills would have their parents sponsor their sporting events all the time. Maybe Mike Barnes was some rich kid whose parents had told him they'd buy him a yacht if he won the All-Valley against whoever had won last year.

He felt like he'd reached a dead-end. He'd scoured newspapers at the library on microfilm readers but so far nothing on Dynatox.

Before he knew it it was the weekend and he was getting into the Ford with Daniel and Mr. Miyagi.

Daniel nervously tapping, hand waving, as he talked. Nervous chatter.

Johnny wanted to grab his hand, wanted to hold it, but it was too wild.

His mom and Daniel had seemed on good terms last time he'd seen them together. So it probably wasn't that.

He got along with the guys.

Johnny didn't have a clue what was making him so nervous.

The trees his mother had said she wanted to get were in the garden and planted.

He could see the starts of the outline take shape.

The garden she wanted to build. It was nice.

He was surprised to see Gabriela and her grandmother.

Daniel seemed distracted by something so Johnny walked over to say hello.

"Happy Birthday Johnny," Gabriela said with a smile.

"Thank you."

"Abuela has been complaining that she hadn't known when your birthday was for years. So she's making up for it," Gabriela said with a smile. "She cooked up a storm. I had to carry so much food from the car."

"Gracias Abuela," Johnny said.

Abuela said something about school and Johnny blinked looking at Gabriela who laughed.

"She wants me to talk about my studies. Sí Abuela. Honestly, she just likes it when I talk about school."

"You're working on your masters, right? Abuela told me but I didn't get what it was you're studying."

Gabriela laughed. "No, that makes sense. It's not like teaching or something you'd probably learned. I'm pursuing a master's in chemical engineering."

"What can you do with that?"

"A couple of things, a lot of my classmates want to be chemists. But I want to work in environmental science. There are some jobs as investigators. That's what I'm writing my thesis on, in that vein. Investigating how the chemicals we produce affect the environment. Might be able to join the FBI if I do that."

Maybe she'd know.

"Have you heard of Dynatox."

"Oh they're the fucking worst. Sorry, Abuela. They keep trying to dump stuff in Borneo. Chloride sludge last I heard. Which will destroy the local fish and prawns which are a huge portion of their food *and* the drinking water. It'll poison it all and people will get sick and possibly die. But whoever owns that company has a shit ton of money and can make people stop talking. Our teacher is currently tackling the Borneo situation or trying but the DA flipped. He's no longer is

working with us. Wait, why do you know of Dynatox?"

"They're sponsoring the next All-Valley."

"Your karate competition?" Gabriela asked with a frown. "Maybe they're trying to better their image? They're kind of a ghost, so even *that* seems silly. I thought you couldn't compete anymore. Isn't it the under 18?"

"I *might* be able to compete if I wanted to this winter, but no. I was looking into it because people have been harassing Daniel over it. They want him to compete."

"Is he going to?"

"He can't. He'll be 19 when the competition starts."

"Then why would people want him to compete?"

"You understand the confusion now," Johnny said with a sigh. "Someone erased part of his age to make it look like he's currently 16. I went to get more info and that's when I learned Dynatox is sponsoring."

"That is weird," Gabriela said crossing her arms thoughtfully.

Johnny felt an arm wrap around his waist and he turned to look at Daniel. He still seemed distracted. There but not fully.

Gabriela explained her thesis and more about investigating the effects of dumping toxic sludge into the environment and the solutions they were working on.

Daniel gave him a gentle squeeze and then wandered off again.

Johnny made a note to check in with him at some point in the night, see what was wrong.

Maybe Mike Barnes was bothering him?

Maybe the finances of the shop were off?

Daniel had decided he'd keep an eye on that and be in charge of their accounting, saying he helped his Mom with it and that he was the best at math.

He saw Jessica come in through the gates and waved. She smiled at

him and he watched Daniel rush over to her, how the two moved together across the garden. Relaxing a little. That was good. Maybe he'd been nervous about her getting lost.

He turned back to Abuela and Gabriela. Abuela had left to go talk to his mother and he blinked, wondering when she'd walked off.

"You know, almost all of the family has moved away," Gabriela said softly, eyes also watching the two women talking. "I'm going to UCLA, so I'm the only one still around. But then one day she said this fancy lady showed up to talk about you. Abuela knew you always said you were okay, lived in the Hills but she said you weren't happy. Eventually, it was better, but not happy. And when she got to learn *why* and was so pissed. We nearly got thrown out of the courtroom because she nearly hit your stepfather with her shoe. Thank god we were in the back at that point, so I got her before the judge noticed." She sighed.

"Abuela was getting lonely and then your mother showed up and kept showing up. Kept coming by early in the morning for breakfast burritos and molletes like she always used to make you. And then you showed up again with Daniel and also kept showing up. My dad called and asked what was happening because apparently when he calls now Abuela says she's busy. It's partially revenge for not calling enough, I know because she can be stubborn, but it's also because your mom and Abuela have been hanging out a lot. Abuela says your mother's Spanish is getting better. She says it reminds her of you. When you were learning. That you two are definitely related and it's kind of fun to have gotten to know the kid first and then see the same traits in the parent. Like ah, that's where he got that from. Not just the hair and eyes. They go out for coffee, go grocery shopping in the markets together, they even do bingo night. Abuela comes here a lot. I just, you know, thanks. I was getting worried about her. If I didn't keep such odd hours because of the labs and my thesis I'd move in with her. I was planning on it. But she seems fine again now. I still might at some point. But it's a relief that she's happy, you know? Like she said you seem to be now."

"I owe her all the thanks," Johnny said. "Her tamales kept us going."

"Your mom said she's in debt for those tamales as well," Gabriela said with a smile. "Abuela's planning on teaching her how to make them. But I think it'll be after she buries her in them. I saw her freezer. Your mom has so many tamales in there, there's like one pint of ice cream and the rest is tamales. It's worse than *my* fridge in my apartment."

He heard the sound of cars and turned to see Bobby's car and Jimmy's pull in next to Daniel's Ford.

"You already met them right?" Johnny asked.

"I did. And Mr. Miyagi. Just the girl who is here with Daniel I haven't met." Gabriela said.

"Jessica, she works across the street from Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees. Ceramic shop."

"Selling ceramics or making them?"

"She makes them. She's currently designing pots for our bonsai with her aunt," Johnny said.

"That's going to be very nice," Gabriela said. "I look forward to seeing it. Go say hi to your friends. I'm going to go see if Abuela and your mother need a translator."

Johnny nodded.

Bobby carried one of his things into the house and then came back, setting the rest down on a table, and came over pulling him into a hug.

"Happy early birthday Johnny."

Johnny hugged him back.

"How's school?"

"Good. Different. I kind of like it, but there's so much to do."

Johnny watched as Dutch, Jimmy, and Tommy talked with Jessica as Daniel was nowhere to be seen.

He scanned the garden then spotted him at his Ford looking into the trunk.

"I told Dutch she's got a boyfriend," Johnny said with a sigh.

"That's fine," Bobby said.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. His parents, I guess before summer, made this big deal about

how he didn't have any *lady friends* or whatever that was supposed to mean. Said he needed to soften his image and the best way to do that was to hang out with girls *platonically*. They're apparently coming to his tournament, so he's scrambling to make friends. It's why he wanted us to bring girls to his match. It's some stupid argument his parents got into with him. He called and ranted about it for like three hours because his parents have like no friends, so doesn't he have a leg up over them? And now they're being picky because most of his friends are guys. Though not *all*. He said a lot of the friends he's made at taekwondo are girls, but they'll be competing as well. His parents said classmates don't count. He even tried super hard to get along with Ali and they made some progress. It was impressive."

"Your sticker method at work?" Johnny asked.

"A bit," Bobby said with a laugh. "But that was before I knew. The girls I know at UCLA are down. They're actually excited about it. Especially because Dutch's teacher is a woman. They want to invite her to some sorority event."

"So you've done your job," Johnny said amused.

"Yup. Dutch's section's going to be like three sororities, his ego is going to be the size of the moon. I haven't told him yet though, so don't let him know. Now he just has to be good at it."

"What if his parents don't show up?" Johnny asked with a frown.

Dutch's parents were the type that didn't show up. Mrs. Douglas usually brought him frozen grapes and snacks too during the All-Valley.

His parents promised to and didn't always make it. They had once.

Johnny was surprised they'd been in town for his mother's divorce. That they'd tried to help. That they'd shown up for *him* but didn't regularly show up for Dutch.

"I'm going to take so many photos," Bobby said. "Like one of those obnoxiously proud parents. I've got film and cameras ready. I'll give you one too. So that even if they're a no show then we've got proof for him, so he can go back to just enjoying slowly making friends instead of this speed friendship dating he's doing."

"Well, Mrs. Douglas is planning to come to cheer him on."

"Oh, shit really? How's she doing?"

"She's good. Dutch and I went to talk to her." Johnny turned to look at Bobby, away from the guys. "Bobby, someone tried to alter Daniel's file at the All-Valley."

"What? Why? How?"

"We told Mrs. Douglas that Daniel will be 19, someone made it look like he's currently 16. I think whatever is happening is related to the All-Valley, something from last year. But I can't figure out who would have it out for him. Because you and I beat everyone else. Whoever it is should've also been gunning for us too if they're bitter that they lost. But they're focused *only* on Daniel."

"He *did* win."

"Yes, but I can't find anyone related to Barnes on the roster."

"Hmm, you know Dutch has been talking to Tommy a lot about it. I've only gathered some of what's going on. Got anything else I can look into?"

"Dynatox. They're a toxic waste company that's sponsoring the All-Valley. Gabriela says she thinks whoever owns it is paying off government officials to look the other way. They're the ones who made the new rules that the champion only has to fight the final match."

"Damn Johnny," Bobby said. "You've already got a suspect? I'll tell Tommy. See what he thinks before I forget."

Johnny nodded and watched Bobby head over to the guys and Jessica, as Jimmy turned to the cooler.

Jimmy came over with drinks in hand.

He passed one to Johnny. Inca Kola.

He looked down at it and then at Jimmy who was smiling at him.

He'd remembered.

Johnny's birthdays weren't usually good. Fine was stretching it. Okay was even stretching it.

Sid turned them into **events**.

The other kids didn't want to be there. But they whatever Sid had gotten as entertainment.

It was more of a chore than anything he actually enjoyed.

Another time where he had to play a part rather than just be.

When he'd gotten older, he had asked if he could invite his friends from karate and Sid had said no.

It'd been the first time that he'd had friends to even invite, rather than a whole bunch of kids he only knew from the country club with who he didn't have anything in common. Kids who talked about their vacations overseas, their fancy tutors, the languages they were learning, the fashion brands they wore, whatever the coolest gadget was, the cars their parents bought them even though they weren't old enough to drive, all this stuff that Johnny thought he was supposed to know about, to have in common with them but he didn't.

He'd usually been very good about just going through the motions. Playing the part.

But that year *he did* have friends.

He actually had something better he could be doing. He could spend time with them.

So when all of the parts he had to play were over, when the entertainment started, he snuck out.

He'd had a bike, some fancy thing that Sid had bought him to get around so that he wouldn't have to drive him around anymore. Wouldn't have to have the staff drive him around.

Johnny hadn't told his friends it was his birthday. He didn't want anything but to spend time with them. Knew they'd be at Jimmy's so he biked his way there. They usually were during that time of the week.

He rang the doorbell and was let in by one of the staff. Who actually had smiled at him, knew his name, and welcomed him in, showing him where the guys were.

He was all dressed up for a fancy party, some stupid suit that Sid had picked out, overdressed for a casual hang out, but he didn't care.

They looked happy to see him and he let himself relax joining them for the board game they had set out and it was a million times better to sit with them and play games than it had been to listen to kids talk about their tennis lessons and violin lessons and their expensive watches and shoes, their stock portfolios, miniature versions of their parents who only cared about their wealth and making friends who could solidify or better that wealth.

He hadn't planned to tell them it was his birthday. But he *had* mentioned it.

A quick sentence at the end of the night before going to his bike that he'd said to Jimmy.

The other guys were tussling and practicing the karate they'd learned in class that week.

He'd told Jimmy it was the best birthday he'd had in a long time and thanked him.

Jimmy had looked at him with his eyes wide, telling him to stay right there before running back into the house.

He came back with a pack of bright yellow drinks.

"They're new for us. From Peru. Supposed to be like a champagne version of soda," he explained. "I'll bring you this every year. If you like it."

Johnny tried it and nodded.

Partially because he *did* like it, and partially because that promise meant he'd have a friend every year which he hadn't hoped for.

That promise was the best birthday gift he'd ever gotten up to that point in his life. It was still one of his favorites. Worth the bruises he'd gotten when he was caught sneaking back in.

Jimmy clinked his glass against Johnny's.

Johnny twisted off the lid and flicked it. It landed on the table.

"Happy Birthday Johnny," Jimmy said with a soft smile.

"Thanks."

He liked catching up with the guys. Hearing about their classes. But

soon it was time to eat, his mother gathering up the guys to help Abuela to carry out the food. Johnny knew her menu backward and forwards. This wasn't on the menu. This was new stuff or at least a lot of it he hadn't seen before.

Gabriela went through explaining what everything was.

Johnny glanced at Daniel. He looked nervous again. He reached out and took his hand, interlacing their fingers, rubbing his thumb over the back of his hand, listening and hoping to help Daniel at the same time.

Tostados, picadillo, mole, some stuffed bell peppers, salad, bionicos, and tacos he did think he recognized.

Everything he ate was delicious.

Bobby brought a cake. A weird-looking cake.

It looked like Bobby had had a rough time trying to get candles on it. But had managed it eventually.

He set it in front of Johnny. He tried to think of a wish. His wishes had always changed over the years. For friends, for Mom to get a job that wasn't awful, to be happy. He had gotten all those wishes granted, slowly over time, so he didn't know what he wanted now.

What was worth wishing for?

He felt the hand in his, still nervous.

He leaned forward and blew out the candles.

Bobby had to cut it with a sharp knife.

"It's the ice cream," he explained. "The whole thing is rock solid for like half a second before it melts. You wouldn't think it'd be a problem since I had to set the whole thing on fire, but that's how bombe Alaska is."

Fancy ice cream cake.

Bobby had always teased him about being the youngest. Said they always had to make up for all those missed birthdays before they were friends. And for the birthday where Johnny hadn't said anything to anyone but Jimmy.

Last year had been a dinosaur confetti cake. The year before that had been a red car. Even though they were usually kidlike, Bobby always made sure a lot of effort went into them. And this one looked the most time-intensive.

Laura was asking about it, Bobby explaining. Chocolate orange cake with vanilla ice cream and meringue that he'd doused in rum and lit on fire. He was smiling like it'd been a lot of fun to set it on fire.

He was sure it had been.

Dutch was asking him about it, interest piqued by fire.

The cake really did collapse into a mess in the LA sun pretty fast. Jessica was helping Gabriella and Dutch finish it off moving on to spoons when his mother brought out gifts.

Jessica pushed her gift first and Johnny pulled out a green handmade mug.

There was no way for her to know that it matched Daniel's favorite at the house. They clearly weren't the same, it was pure coincidence, but it was perfect.

He got clothes from the guys. Each box was full of clothing.

Bobby had a big grin on his face. "You'll have to let us know which looks you like the best."

It was like they thought his fashion taste was awful.

Actually, he knew they did from Valentine's Day. He could tell from their smiles that this was that part two. Which look would grab Daniel's attention the most? They did realize he and Daniel already were dating. That it was fine now right?

Apparently no, his fashion sense was going to forever be one of their complaints. Wait till he wore the stuff he'd gotten from Okinawa. Maybe then they'd stop thinking he was a fashion disaster. No one else really ever complained.

It was nice though that he was slowly clearing clothes from Sid out of his closet. This would help. Even if they clearly were taking bets on whose look would garner more attention when the last time they'd tried Daniel hadn't even batted an eye.

He picked up a box that was wrapped haphazardly.

Daniel was sitting stiffly next to him. Was this what he was nervous about? A gift? Johnny didn't care what Daniel got him. He'd like whatever it was. Even if he wanted to tease him about his wrapping skills, the fact that he'd tried was sweet.

He carefully set the lid aside and found himself looking at his own red jacket.

The jacket he'd walked past in the window for months.

The one he'd saved up for working at the country club for.

How he'd worked extra hours worried someone else would buy it first.

He carefully lifted it up.

He remembered putting the patch on it. The cobra because he'd been so happy to be a part of something that he'd gone out of his way to incorporate it into all of his stuff. Not even thinking that it'd be a mistake. To ruin in his jacket, the only article of clothing he'd ever bought himself because he wanted it, not because he needed clothes for school or because Sid wanted him to not embarrass him.

He remembered all the work that had gone into getting that patch on, and then the tedious task of removing it without destroying the jacket, hoping desperately that it wouldn't be obvious, but nearly five years had made the difference obvious.

He couldn't bring himself to throw it away or put it into the box with his other karate stuff.

There was a new patch, covering the spot where the old one had been, hiding the difference in color, the shadow of the old cobra.

It was the same one that he'd seen on the back of Daniel's gi during the tournament, similar to the red jacket he'd worn at the o-bon festival in Okinawa.

It was sewn on, sturdy.

Johnny had tried to sew the cobra on. It'd taken him over a week because he kept stabbing himself with the needle and kept breaking thinner needles. He'd had to ask one of the librarians who had a leather jacket with patches on it how to do it.

He turned to Daniel. "How did you-?"

Daniel turned to him explaining what he'd done. Nervous in his tone. Unsure if Johnny liked it.

If they weren't sitting at a table surrounded by friends and family Johnny would've kissed him.

He would later. When there was time. When the spotlight wasn't directly on him.

He smiled putting it on, "It's perfect." he said.

It was like the return of an old friend, a problem he'd been trying to solve for a little over half a year and Daniel had solved it. Had fixed it for him. Better than before.

The next thing passed to him was a large box covered in stamps. It said it was from LaRusso.

Johnny looked back at Daniel who seemed relieved and now was staring at the new box with intense curiosity. So different LaRusso. His mother?

Johnny took the scissors his mother passed him uneasily.

He got along with Mrs. LaRusso but he never had expected her to send him anything.

He opened it up, quietly read the card wishing him well and wishing she was there too.

He pulled out a hand-knit sweater.

"Your mom knits?" Johnny asked looking at Daniel, catching a triumphant look on Jessica's face.

"No, uh, my grandmother knits. That's from Nonnia," Daniel said. "Everyone in the family has one. It takes her several months. So she had to have started that right after she met you but...I guess Ma said something. Had to have, yet..." he trailed off chewing his lip thoughtfully.

It was blue with grey and it looked warm. Something nice to wear in the mountains or if they visited Newark again.

Johnny carefully folded it back up and set it aside.

Something the whole family had.

What did that mean? That seemed like too much. He'd met them *once*.

That was a promise that threw him. Hadn't expected that. He pulled out a box of saltwater taffy.

He turned to Daniel. "From Nonnino?" he asked.

Daniel laughed. "Yes."

Johnny felt like he'd never was going to finish the saltwater taffy he'd been given *last* time. Had ended up sharing a lot of it with the kids he babysat and the staff at the animal shelter.

Maybe they could make a candy dish for kids at the bonsai shop and put saltwater taffy in it. Okinawan bonsai with New Jersey candies to give away.

Fitting, but kind of weird.

Underneath were a bunch of jars carefully wrapped in multiple layers of bubble wrap and recipe cards, handwritten.

Johnny handed them over to Daniel to read through as he unwrapped the jars and set them out.

"Blueberry pie filling. Ma just made it from this year's blueberry haul," Daniel said tapping a few of them. "And peaches she also harvested. We've got an aunt with a fruit farm," Daniel explained tapping some more jars. "Cobbler and pie," he said holding up the cards.

Johnny would have to ask to talk to Mrs. LaRusso the next time Daniel called her. Thank her. Maybe send a note. Something from LA for her and his grandparents. His mom and Daniel could help.

Next up was his Mom who'd gotten him a bike.

Sid had gotten rid of his when he got the Avanti.

It had just disappeared one day.

He'd told her about the date list, bike rides, and how he was going to just borrow one of the guy's bikes. But this would be easier.

She kissed the top of his head and ruffled his hair. Mr. Miyagi explained his gift was back at the house for his actual birthday.

Johnny hadn't expected anything. He already had gotten so much from Mr. Miyagi. He didn't need anything else. But he thanked him warmly.

Gabriela then taught them the piñata song and the game began. It was fun. Not easy.

He liked watching the guys fail to hit it. Even his mom and Mr. Miyagi tried. Mr. Miyagi got a good hit in, but it didn't crack.

It did crack when Jessica hit it but not enough for it to fully open.

But it made it easier for Johnny's next turn when he did get it, a cascade of colorful candies he recognized from what Abuela would sometimes give him and ones he didn't recognize.

"Pulparindo," Gabriela said, explaining to Jessica the different ones she'd picked up. "It's tamarind."

"This one?" Dutch asked.

Gabriela smiled. "Peanut mazapan."

Johnny picked up what looked like a lollipop he remembered was like a chocolate-covered marshmallow with a face on it. He saw Daniel pick up a yellow and red package. "Careful, that's spicy, if I remember correctly it's mango flavored but with like chili powder."

"Sounds good," Daniel said with a smile. "Fun to try."

"Gracias Abuela," Johnny said smiling at her. She gave him a big hug, wishing him a happy birthday.

It took a while to clean up all the candy off the grass. Maybe not the chaos of if he'd been five, but it was nice to sit around and chat about it. To listen to Abuela talk about her favorite ones, Gabriela's favorites, and what had changed since she was a kid, laughing with her grandmother.

Eventually, it got dark out and Jessica had to leave, giving him a warm hug and wishing him a happy birthday again.

The guys were spending the night at their homes with their families. Dutch decided to crash with Tommy.

He'd see them later.

He thanked Abuela and Gabriela again before they left. Gabriela promised to ask more about Dynatox and would talk to her professor.

His mother helped carry his gifts to the Ford. Carefully putting them into the trunk.

"Where does this fall on birthday parties?" she asked with a smile.

"Best one," Johnny said with a smile.

She smiled kissing his cheek. "We'll do lunch on your birthday. I'll swing by and drop your bike off then. It's not going to fit."

"Thanks, Mom," he said hugging her.

"Of course, 18 is a big deal. I'm glad we got to celebrate it here together," she said warmly. "So proud of you."

"I'm proud of *you*," he said.

She laughed, hugging him tighter. "Okay, you guys get home safe. I'm going to go enjoy the margaritas Abuela made me before she left. Hers are the best."

She walked back into the house and Johnny walked over to the passenger seat.

It *was* the best birthday he'd had.

He didn't want to imagine what his birthday would've been with Sid still around. He'd probably have been kicked out. Woken up Tuesday morning by the staff with his bags packed and sent on his way. Promptly kicked out of the nest.

Daniel's hand found his on the drive back home. Talking to Mr. Miyagi about pie-making. How he used to do it all the time back home, asking him which ones they should make first. Blueberry or peach? Relaxed and at ease.

Johnny gently squeezed his hand. He cast his vote for blueberry and Daniel grinned at him, a quick warm glance but it led to the details of making blueberry pie and Johnny couldn't wait.

Chapter End Notes

So much food. Here are a few.
https://www.mexicoinmykitchen.com/bionico-fruit-cocktail-

recipe/
The cake is a combo between these recipes: baked/bombe alaska Chocolate orange cake

Piñata song English is 0:10-0:54 and Spanish is 1:25-2:08 (and you know if you want to learn some shapes you can stick around for the rest of it/ part in between)

You may notice there's a little link in "works inspired by this one" note now. usa123 wrote a fic called "Warm Places, Safe Spaces" exploring if "The next time Sid gets angry, Johnny is forced to take Daniel's advice." Warning for Sid being well...Sid.

Did not know Ao3 had something set up for inspired by works, it's super cool. I'm honored that you were inspired to write something based on this.

Part of the Family

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They'd gotten home and carried all of Johnny's gifts into the house. The fruit and candies going into the kitchen, the leftovers Ms. Lawrence had given them went into the fridge, the mug was washed and set out to dry, and the clothes went into the closet.

On the last trip Johnny had leaned over him, hand on the top of the trunk, preparing to close it when Daniel grabbed the last box of clothes.

Johnny had leaned down, kissing him, other arm wrapping around his waist pulling him in close, or as close as he could with the box in Daniel's hands.

Johnny had only pulled away when they heard Mr. Miyagi humming, leaving them both breathless.

He took the box from Daniel, thanked him, and walked back into the house, leaving Daniel to shut the trunk to the Ford and lean against it. He wanted to chase after Johnny but Mr. Miyagi was talking to Johnny with a small deck of cards in his hands. So he waited till his heart settled and his breath returned before going back into the house. The rest of the gifts were put away and they'd all sat together and drank tea and played hanafuda until it was late.

He'd woken up early and was in the kitchen. He was staring at the jars his mother had sent it was nice to have his mother's recipe cards. He missed fruit season in Jersey. Missed how they'd all visit his aunt as a kid and pick fruit to make compotes, ice cream, sweets, and all sorts of things to eat. On the farm, the family orchard, they had a yearly recipe contest and his mom had won. *Several times.*

He remembered being little and holding his father's hand and him telling Daniel that everyone in the family was going to be bitterly jealous and his mother would be so proud because she was the best. Everyone would know what his father knew.

Daniel had told his dad that he too knew his mom was the best. Which had made his dad laugh and ruffle his hair.

It was her award-winning pie recipe. Most of the hard work was already done. He'd have to call her and let her know they'd made it safely and the bigger question. He had to ask her why Nonnia had sent a sweater.

He was suspicious about that.

It took Nonnia *months* to complete her designs. Especially now that she was older.

Johnny and he had only been dating two months now? Almost three? But he hadn't told his mom until he got home from Okinawa. So much less than that for his grandparents to have found out. Had they taken one look at Johnny and decided, we're keeping him? Because that was what the sweater was.

Nonnia didn't make them for *anyone*.

She didn't make them for his cousin's boyfriends or girlfriends, didn't make them until someone was engaged, or hell, if she didn't like them, not until after they'd been married and winter was coming.

She'd dally.

She'd be stubborn about it, wouldn't make it until the last possible second.

One of his cousins was supposed to be getting married and her fiance's sweater had been in the works for over a year.

Nonnia was determined not to finish it until the first winter they were married.

Said the guy seemed like a flake.

But Johnny...it was going to stir up a fight in the family if anyone heard. And knowing the family...Well...His mother would gloat for sure.

She had to know.

And Johnny had treated it so carefully. Almost as carefully as the jacket. He clearly knew it was a big deal, just not *how* big of a deal.

That his nonnia didn't just make sweaters for anyone. And it was a nice sweater. Johnny was going to look nice in it. It'd made his eyes pop. It'd be easy to get him to wear it.

Nonnia had gone for the good stuff. A cool design, a fun look, soft yarn. It'd been made with care and love and Daniel didn't know how to tell Johnny that the next time, there would have to be a next time, that they went to Newark, that Nonnia had decided he was family.

And that meant a lot.

Or would it be better not to tell him? Not to make him nervous?

Oh god what was he going to do?

They were going to expect him for Thanksgiving and Christmas, his grandparent's big events, wedding anniversaries, and big birthdays.

Daniel thought *he* was bad about jumping too many steps ahead. He'd always wondered where he got it. Clearly, it was from Nonnia. Nonnia already blessed their union.

Though...

What if she hadn't? What if she just adopted Johnny as a grandson?

No, she had to know.

There was no way around it. Nothing else made sense. Nonnia was jumping ahead. Further, than Daniel even dared.

Was it because of laws? Did that put Daniel in a different spot than the rest of the family? Because he couldn't legally marry, his boyfriend got a sweater after only dating a couple of months?

His cousins were going to go ballistic.

He could hear the family arguments already.

Would they drive down or fly? Daniel liked the idea of driving. They could stay at little hotels along the way. It'd been about 10 states or so on the way to LA, taken over 40 hours and they'd taken their time.

Maybe Daniel and Johnny could take their time.

Maybe they could add it to the list.

To the jar.

Long road trip. He'd just hope they could do *something* fun in every state, they'd be alone, so Daniel could try.

Maybe if he floated the idea across, maybe next year after the shop was all set up he could suggest they drive to Newark for the holidays and if Johnny complained about awful traffic or something, Daniel could recommend they explore along the way.

The states and each other.

Johnny liked adventures, and he was pretty sure Johnny would be down for the second part too.

It might be the only chance they'd get that wasn't interrupted.

He heard the sound of a van and watched as Dutch's van came to a park. They came in in a whirlwind, waking Johnny up and dragged them to the beach. They played beach volleyball and built sandcastles, which Daniel didn't think he could get competitive about but he did.

They spent the night at Mr. Miyagi's, Jimmy grilling so they could eat in the garden.

On Monday a package arrived.

Another mystery box.

This one was postmarked from Okinawa.

Daniel just knew there was something in there for Johnny from Chozen.

Who had even told Chozen when Johnny's birthday was?

How had he known?

Maybe Mr. Miyagi had told Yukie and she'd told him?

Could Daniel go a single month without hearing from Chozen?

Was the Pacific Ocean just not big enough?

What had Chozen bought Johnny?

Would Johnny like it *more* than his gift?

He couldn't right?

Daniel knew Johnny better. His gift *had* to have be the better one.

But Chozen had money...right? Sato hadn't *fully* cut him off. Making him one of the richest guys on the island. Sort of. At least in the village.

He kind of wanted to burn it. But there might be things from Yukieand Kumiko in there.

And maybe it'd be nothing.

Another book.

He wouldn't do it.

He was dying to know what was in it.

It wasn't like they would know if Johnny opened it early.

Besides, wasn't it his birthday over there anyway? Due to the time difference?

Tommy had caught him staring at the box. The guys had taken a couple of days of classes off, saying that it wasn't a problem.

They'd leave Tuesday morning before Ms. Lawrence came to get Johnny for their lunch.

"What is it?"

"Package from Okinawa for Johnny."

"Oh cool. Wait, why do you look like you hate it?"

"It's probably something from *Chozen*."

"Why would Chozen send something? Is it part of his penance?" Tommy asked with a laugh, walking past to pour himself some tea out of the pitcher in the fridge and coming back.

"No, it's because he *likes* Johnny."

Tommy stared at him for a moment.

Daniel could see the gears going.

"*Oh*," Tommy said, then laughed into his glass. "You know Johnny

probably doesn't know."

Daniel sighed. "I know that."

"So why are you upset?"

"Because Chozen is *flirting* with *my* boyfriend. I won the match to the death. I thought that meant I'd win space. Space from Chozen, but it seems instead I won him no longer wanting to kill me, but instead trying to steal my boyfriend."

Tommy smiled softly. "Your life is sure full of adventure. I think if someone had come up to me last year and told me anything about your life now with Johnny I would not have believed it."

Daniel looked at him, relaxing a little. "Yeah, me either."

When Johnny got up he didn't want to open it yet. Saving it for his actual birthday. And the guys had plans, so Daniel didn't have a chance to try and persuade him.

The guys refused to tell them where they were going.

Dutch driving the van only said, "Somewhere Johnny's going to love."

Daniel tried to think of where. sitting in the backseat next to Johnny.

He'd taken the day off from working in the shop, under the promise the guys would come up and help on another day.

Dutch said he would, reminding Daniel he'd helped sort dirt. That he already was working for free.

Daniel promised to make him dinner sometime.

Food seemed an easy reward for the guys.

They parked and Daniel looked around for a clue.

"Johnny do you have a clue where we are?"

"I think so," Johnny said.

"So part of your birthday gift," Bobby said. "Is that we bought you a membership, so you can come whenever you want."

"What is it?" Daniel asked.

"Three in one," Jimmy said with a smile.

"Yeah, sorry Daniel you might find him here instead of the beach," Dutch said amused. "Or your bed."

"Welcome to the Huntington Library, art museum, *and* botanical gardens," Tommy said as they headed down the path towards a large building.

"You may want to bring Mr. Miyagi, they've got bonsai and a Japanese garden with a tea house," Bobby said.

"We wanted to invite him but he didn't want to take the day off from working in the shop."

Daniel nodded, he'd asked if Mr. Miyagi wanted Daniel to come in and Mr. Miyagi had shaken his head and told him to have fun.

He felt bad.

But it'd be good to see other designs and to be able to tell Mr. Miyagi about it later.

It was kind of like work. Research.

Which according to the guys was accurate. They started in the library, walking through the exhibition hall looking at original manuscripts of books

Daniel hadn't heard of many of them.

Johnny though moved slow, studying the books on display. When he was done looking they walked around the library for a bit, quietly as people were studying, and researching, before heading into the art gallery.

Daniel knew the art galleries in New York and New Jersey. But he hadn't been to a lot of them in LA.

It was nice to walk around a gallery again.

To see new things.

Though he would rather be in the gardens. It seemed like the guys were thinking the same thing, trying to just give Johnny a taste, so he

could come back and explore later. Pulling them along and to the gardens after a short half-hour in the gallery.

They headed to the conservatory looking at orchids and listened as a worker explained how one of the plants, a type of orchid, and the beans from it became what was used to make vanilla. Daniel hadn't ever seen it up close. Bobby telling him that they infused the beans in vodka to make their own extract at the bakery.

They wandered through the gardens, stopping for tea at the Japanese tea house, looking at bonsai, trees, and flowers until Daniel's feet were tired from all the walking. Until all the plants started to blur together.

Tuesday morning Daniel got up early.

Their room was still full of the guys and he was ready to have the room back to themselves again.

He still wanted to know what was in the box.

Wanted time alone with Johnny.

He had wanted to wake up with him with his hands all over him, but the guys were there.

He learned his lesson last time.

So he got up and made pancakes.

Chocolate chip with banana.

He was pretty proud of the idea and how they turned out, when Johnny and the guys came out.

He set them out on plates for them with an exaggerated flourish and a big grin on his face.

"What's this?" Dutch asked.

"I'm thinking I'm going to call them Bananarama."

"Like the girl band?"

"Yes," Daniel said.

"It's good," Johnny said with a smile after trying them.

Mr. Miyagi same and had some, complimenting him on his cooking before heading to the shop. The guys left shortly after, hugging them tight and wishing Johnny a happy birthday before heading out.

"You gonna open the box?" Daniel asked.

Johnny turned to him and went to grab it. He moved it carefully to the counter, standing next to it with a pair of scissors.

Daniel moved in close, he knew nothing was going to jump out and attack, but he still wanted to be close.

Daniel didn't want to look.

He had to look.

He had to know what Chozen had sent.

But he also didn't want to know. What if it was better than his gift?

Couldn't be. Could it?

He was going to do something he wanted to for a while, and hopefully, it'd be fine. It'd calm him down. It'd get him through whatever awful thing Chozen had sent.

Daniel slid his hand into the back pocket of Johnny's jeans.

Johnny stiffened and his gaze flicked to Daniel just for a brief moment, Daniel smiled at him. He wasn't moving, he was staying put.

Johnny hadn't pulled away or swatted at his hand, so his hand was *staying* there.

Johnny blushed but turned back to open the box.

He pulled out an envelope and set it aside.

There was a box in thick fancy fabric with colorful paper folded on top.

Johnny carefully opened it, careful of the paper and unwrapping the patterned cloth with white flowers and two cranes.

He set it aside to find a wooden box. He lifted up the lid and found a

sake set.

"You didn't turn 21," Daniel said with a laugh. "Can they drink earlier in Japan?"

"Yes, but it's 20. Not 18." Johnny said. "It's pretty though."

Daniel had to agree, but he didn't get it.

The next thing Johnny pulled out was also wrapped in cloth, but softer. Another box.

There was a little note, it was from Yukie, wishing Johnny a happy birthday.

Daniel relaxed watching as Johnny opened the box. There was a recipe on top. Instructions with pictures on how to make a sweetened iced matcha drink.

It was all of the stuff Kumiko had used during their matcha lesson including a fancy and beautiful container of matcha. Daniel laughed softly.

"Maybe you'll like it this time," he said.

"I think that's why she sent the instructions," he said.

"What else is in there?" Daniel asked.

Johnny pulled out a card and flipped it open. It was from Kumiko. He read it then passed it to Daniel.

She'd drawn in it. Wished him a happy birthday, said she sent him gifts from Tokyo. Snacks and a Fuurin.

"What's a Fuurin?" Daniel asked.

Johnny was carefully opening a box that had been wrapped in bubble wrap. He carefully pulled out a glass cup with a bead and string, hand-painted with flowers and a piece of thick paper. There was a string at the top and Johnny held it carefully. It made a soft sound as he held it up.

"A wind chime?" Johnny asked.

"I guess so," Daniel said looking around. "How about there?" he asked pointing to a spot near their room.

Johnny nodded putting it back in the box.

"Says here Yukie also sent charms?"

Johnny opened the other envelope that he hadn't earlier and tipped it.

Small cloth satchels fell into his palm along with a letter in annoying handwriting.

Yakuyoke for Daniel.

There was a little sketch.

Johnny picked it out and handed it to Daniel.

ward off evil.

"I don't think it's working," Daniel said with a frown.

Shobai-hanjo for Miyagi, good luck in business.

Johnny set that one aside for Mr. Miyagi.

Shiawase for Johnny, happiness

Johnny held it gently in his hands.

Daniel frowned looking at the paper. Something had been scratched out. Like Chozen had wanted to write something else but had to change it. He studied the characters between the two. They matched. So Johnny had gotten the happiness one.

But the one that was marked out said *En-musubi.* There was nothing that said En-musubi.

Daniel frowned then looked back at the card from Kumiko. "Snacks are next."

Johnny nodded opening up the next box which was filled with tiny colorful candies. Flowers and little stars and what looked like a small cake.

"What's that?" Johnny asked leaning over to read the card over Daniel's shoulder again.

"Cheesecake?" Daniel said looking at it. "Apparently Japan has its own style, so she found it in Tokyo and they promised it'd be good when it

arrived. So essentially she sent you lots of sugar."

Johnny laughed, pointing at the bottom of the card.

Hope your birthday is the sweetest. -Kumiko

"Too bad the guys already left could've gotten help," Johnny said.

"Well Mr. Miyagi will help tonight I'm sure. Though I guess I'm not going to be making you a cake," Daniel said with a sigh.

Johnny looked at him in surprise.

"You were going to bake me a cake?"

"Well yeah. Either I was or Mr. Miyagi was. He made mine last year. It was nice. But we'd be drowning in cake, we're already drowning in candy between my Nonnio, Kumiko, and Abuela you've made out better than any kid has for Halloween in their life. I've never seen someone get so much candy for their birthday."

"Maybe I'm just that sweet," Johnny said with a teasing smile.

No one was home. Mr. Miyagi was at the shop. The guys had left to go back to school and Dutch to his class.

If he let Johnny tease too much he'd be insufferable, he'd run off, Daniel would give chase, nothing would happen because by the time Daniel caught him Ms. Lawrence would arrive to take Johnny out for lunch.

But if he moved *now*. If he kept him caught then maybe he could get things moving and he wouldn't spend hours frustrated. All day daydreaming about how if he'd moved faster, if he'd done something different what could've been.

But if he struck now...

Daniel set the card down and turned, putting his hand on Johnny's cheek pulling him down to a kiss. A deep kiss. He did taste sweet and warm. Mostly the sweet syrup from the pancakes still lingering on his tongue.

Johnny kissed him back, meeting him with the same intensity.

Daniel moved his other hand out of Johnny's pocket and to his waist, turning them, so Johnny's back was to counter, breakable items out of

the way.

No escape. No running. Pressing closer, flush against Johnny.

Johnny's arms came around him, holding him close. Hands on Daniel's back.

Daniel moved his hand from Johnny's hip to under his soft t-shirt, pulling it up. He pulled away just enough to move to Johnny's neck, lips to his neck, and fingers touching warm skin.

"Maybe a *little* sweet," he whispered, teasing, liking the way Johnny shivered against him, the easy way he was able to get a leg between Johnny's. How Johnny seemed to get a little weak and how his hand had to come back to the edge of the counter for stability as Daniel ground against him, making a point, hearing the sound fall from his lips and feeling how Johnny's body responded.

He glanced at the clock over Johnny's shoulder. Double-checking they had time. Two hours before Ms. Lawrence was supposed to get there. They had time for *something* at least. More than last time.

Daniel was trying to get Johnny's shirt off but Johnny's hands came to his wrists, pulling away. Or trying. Daniel hadn't given him much space, but Daniel paused looking at him.

"Our room," Johnny managed, blue eyes dark, breathing heavy.

Daniel blinked at him. Stepped back carefully. Johnny walked ahead of him, taking his hand and pulling him to their room, shutting the door behind them.

Daniel looked around.

Bed. Bed right?

He started to walk towards the bed and Johnny let go of his hand.

He turned with a frown, about to ask, only to see Johnny taking off his shirt.

Daniel's mouth went dry.

Less than five feet to the bed. A couple of steps.

He had seen Johnny shirtless, but there was something heavier in the air, something about knowing Johnny was taking off his shirt for

Daniel, *because* of Daniel that threw him off a little.

Johnny walked back to him and leaned down to kiss him, cupping Daniel's face in his hands. Daniel dragged his fingers down Johnny's back, hands going into his back pockets, grinning at the surprised sound Johnny made when he squeezed.

Bed. Move to the bed. Remember the goal. The plan. As haphazardly put together as it was.

He let go and pulled away.

Maybe he could be competitive.

Something more so than Johnny.

He took off his shirt, moving slow, knowing Johnny was watching, stepping back towards the bed.

A challenge, a dare.

He added his jeans to the pile on the floor, less graceful than he'd hoped, but he'd work on it. He smiled at Johnny. As much as he wanted to unwrap Johnny like a present, he also wanted to see him do it on his own. He'd like to watch him take off his shirt. Wanted more.

"Your turn," Daniel said.

Johnny wasn't graceful either, which was a relief. Maybe it was just the way jeans were.

He pulled Johnny towards him, turning so he was facing him, back to the bed, twisting on his heel, turning, a swift move of his other foot, catching behind Johnny's with a push so that he landed on the bed.

It was almost perfect, but Johnny read him, saw what he was doing and with an amused look, he pulled Daniel with him so they collapsed in a heap on the bed.

He'd wanted to take a moment to enjoy a simple image of Johnny mostly almost completely undressed in his bed looking up at him with those eyes on him. That look that was so heated, not the way it'd once been heated, but in such a better way. It still got his heart pounding but it was different, pleasant, and also sent blood the wrong way. The right way maybe. But Johnny was laughing softly, pleased at having caught Daniel off guard.

Daniel pushed himself up.

Johnny following him, leaning against one arm while his other hand went to the back of Daniel's head, fingers in his hair, pulling him into a kiss again.

There was a limit it seemed to distance, every time one moved a couple of steps back the other followed.

A theme since the start. Balancing on opposite ends, unable to escape the other, when the other got too far they'd find one another and it'd led to blows, but now it led to something better, the space dwindling, the walls breaking down, until it was just the two of them, unable to keep their hands and lips off one another. Reaching for the other whenever they moved, Johnny's fingers in Daniel's hair, gentle and soft as Daniel explored the skin beneath him.

Johnny curled up towards him, like he wasn't sure what to do, like he wanted to do something, when Daniel glanced up at him, watching, but there wasn't much for Johnny to do, with Daniel sinking lower, pretty pleased with the red marks he'd left along the way.

He stopped at Johnny's hip, Daniel wanted to see everything, and if Johnny stayed like that, looking down at him he could.

That unwavering eye contact.

He wondered which of them would lose the intense staring contest they were having.

He pulled the last of the fabric down when Johnny didn't seem inclined to stop him, his face was flushed, all red and pink, lips parted as he breathed heavily.

Daniel was going to watch him, every reaction to his mouth on him, over him, around him.

Johnny's held his gaze as long as he could, a valiant effort and then he let his head fall back with a sound that reverberated down Daniel's spine. He watched as Johnny's hands tightened around the bedding like he needed to be holding something.

Daniel wanted to kiss him, see his face again, and not just that exposed throat.

He could.

He would.

Wiggling out of the last of his own clothes to press close to Johnny.

Johnny's head came back up, eyes on him, not letting Daniel be quick enough to kiss his neck like he'd wanted but the roll of Johnny's hips was enough.

There was more they could do, but he wanted that to be different, to take their time. In his head that was a whole night, a whole day, with no plans on the horizon, but this, moving against each other was pleasant, with Johnny's eyes back on him, kissing him, feeling Johnny shift so he was propped up on one arm, the other on Daniel's hip, trying to adjust for better friction, for more skin to touch, following the moves Daniel made like he was studying, learning, memorizing Daniel the way Daniel tried to memorize Johnny.

If Daniel could go back in time he'd tell himself not to go to the beach that night. Befriend the old guy in the workshop and learn kata from him, learn karate, and don't try to date Ali. Try to date the other hot blonde at school. The one who looked like he was a little rough on the outside, with the intimidating friends, but it was all on the outside, that it was nice under that surface. Because if he'd moved faster, better, then he could have had Johnny moaning under him and into kisses earlier and fewer bruises.

Definitely, none on his heart because once he gave it to Johnny he handled that like he'd been given something made out of the most fragile glass and held it so carefully.

More careful than Daniel probably was with Johnny. Hand squeezing a pec enjoying every sound Johnny made, knowing he wasn't quiet himself. Glad no one else was home.

Things probably had to happen the way they had for Johnny to be out from under Kreese's thumb and Sid's shadow, but Daniel could daydream.

A world where LA welcomed him with open arms from the start, where he made friends and the soccer team and road on the back of Johnny's bike to school, talking Johnny into coming to his soccer matches, kissing under the bleachers, going to parties, maybe being one of those couples that disappeared into one of the guest bedrooms for a couple of hours, leaving awkward and disheveled, obvious when caught. Passing notes in class. Dancing together in his shower costume with Johnny at the Halloween dance. Hidden away together.

But even if that would've been nice. Not to have hurt his knee, not to have gotten beaten on Halloween, chased, and run off the road, he had Johnny now. Melting into the bed, boneless and looking at Daniel with those blue eyes, it didn't matter, as long as he had this, leaning down to press his forehead against Johnny's.

A guy who his grandparents liked enough to already accept as family after one meeting, who spent all of his money that he had on Daniel and their sensei, a guy who was so awful at telling people liked him that he hadn't noticed Chozen's affections, or the way people looked at him when they were out, hadn't noticed the girls who flirted. Who'd taken time to craft an arrangement for Daniel's father, who'd held his hand and listened to him talk, who listened to every word, who worked out to do something Daniel had said partially as a joke and then had done it in a photoshoot, who had looked at him so warmly now, like he felt the same. As his breathing slowed as Daniel's calmed down to match him, laying on him heavily but not uncomfortably yet. Arms coming around Daniel's waist, holding him.

As long as he ended up here, with Johnny, the path didn't matter.

Chapter End Notes

> En-musubi (you get 1 for wanting a relationship, 2 to protect a relationship) Chozen tried to send just one and Yukie and Sato nixed it. Because the three of them went together to get the charms to send and Sato was like ah, hoping for a relationship? Good luck nephew. But then when he tried to send it they were like no no no. You can only send two, not one if you want to send it to Johnny. Because he's in a happy relationship. They thought it was an innocent mistake. So Chozen's had to keep it and had to swap it for a general happiness one. They did however miss the other thing he sent. Like the sake cup is fine, they thought that was cool, but again kind of weird because Johnny's not turning 20.
>
> Chozen sent the sake cups because of Sankon No Gi which is a ceremony where you drink sake together, usually for weddings to welcome your S/O into the family, and sometimes to join the mafia (yakuza, which kind of fits Chozen), but it essentially is a ceremony to become part of the family. Like next time we see each other we drink as family. They also missed the specific cloth Chozen used because he'd already wrapped it. It's an obi, which is a type of kimono belt kind of the white flowers are bellflowers (love) and cranes (marriage). And the paper is noshi, a type of

decorative origami for gifts. Essentially the flirt went up to 1000%. So even though Daniel is like I don't know what this is but I'm suspicious, he's right lol.

The stars are Konpeitō, the flowers are wasanbon. I wanted Kumiko to send Tokyo Banana but it wasn't invented until 1991 so I went with the cheesecake which can be found everywhere.

I also did not mean for Johnny's birthday to be like three chapters, but well whoops.

Thieves in the Night

His mother wanted to know what Johnny had gotten from Mr. Miyagi for his birthday. They were at her house eating dinner. It'd been a couple of weeks since his birthday, rolling into September. His birthday lunch had been mostly talking about the library and the package from Okinawa. He hadn't gotten his gift from Mr. Miyagi at that point. And she'd been busy since.

She had ordered take out and they sat at the tiny kitchen table she got.

"A hachimaki," Johnny said.

She thought for a moment, knowing the word and trying to place it.

"Ah!" she said when she remembered. "The headband right? For karate?"

"Yeah," he said warmly.

It really had been a good birthday. He'd never celebrated so much.

He was a little embarrassed by all the attention he'd gotten. Of having all the focus on him. It had been nice.

They'd eaten dinner together, Daniel had cooked and they put candles in the cheesecake even though Johnny had protested because he'd already done that, but he'd blown them out and they'd eaten the cheesecake with Mr. Miyagi who had helped him find a good spot to hang up the windchime and had given him the hachimaki.

Mr. Miyagi had also accepted the charm with a warm smile on his face putting it in his wallet to take to the shop.

It had been a peaceful couple of weeks and a nice day with his mom.

They'd worked out the garden. He'd spent most of the afternoon helping her plant flowers, shrubs, and decorative grasses. Telling her that the shop was expected to open soon and that they might actually be ready sooner.

Mr. Miyagi was leaving all the bonsai at home and it was a small army of tiny trees, he liked looking at all of them, carrying his own over from time to time to see how it looked amongst the crowd, able to

pick his out instantly. But he never left it there.

He'd noticed she'd circled the opening date on the calendar.

He also told her about Dutch's taekwondo tournament, explained the differences, invited her.

"Is he fighting or doing tricks?" she asked.

"Fighting I think," Johnny said.

He wasn't sure. Dutch had been talking about the boards he could break. Three in one go now. But Dutch also made it sound like the tournament was like the All-Valley. A lot of fighting.

She sighed.

"I'd like to, but those boys are important to me. I can't sit and watch Dutch get hit. I know myself too much. I'd get up and yell at the ref and have to be escorted out."

Johnny snorted at the mental image. Of some opponent getting a hit in, not even a good hit, and his mother shouting from the stands. He knew she didn't like to see *him* get hurt. But the fact it spilled out to his friends was kind of sweet.

They ate ice cream in front of the TV, watching a movie she'd rented and it was so nice.

Peaceful.

Johnny kissed her on the cheek and left to get the Avanti.

It was a Friday night.

The guys were supposed to be coming over.

He was looking forward to seeing them. He wanted to tell Dutch that his mother would come if he promised he wouldn't get hurt or hit. Otherwise, his mother was going to climb down out of the stands and chew out the ref for letting anyone touch him.

Dutch would be delighted.

He pulled into Mr. Miyagi's lot and parked the Avanti.

The guy's cars were there, the lights were on.

The truck wasn't there which meant Daniel and Mr. Miyagi were still at the shop.

Johnny hopped out of the Avanti then stopped.

There were a lot of footprints in the dirt. It was all scuffled up.

"Guys?" Johnny called, running towards the door.

There was blood in the dirt.

Blood on the door.

Blood on the floor as he pushed open the doors.

He hurried through the house looking for them, then spotted them laying down in the kitchen bruised and battered.

"Yo, Johnny welcome home!" Jimmy called with a lazy wave of his hand holding an ice pack to his eye.

"What the hell happened?" Johnny asked voice tight.

"We met Mike Barnes," Tommy said.

"And his two friends," Bobby added.

Johnny rushed to get the first aid kit.

The green stuff that had been used on him when he was hurt.

He sunk down next to them, frantically looking them over, trying to assess the damage.

"Nothing's broken," Bobby said as Johnny helped him sit up. "Except maybe my pride. I've gotten a little rusty."

"We got here and they were trying to make off with the bonsai. Don't worry, all the bonsai are fine, we scared them off and beat their asses, or at least got some good licks in," Jimmy said as Johnny looked carefully at his eye.

It was just going to be a nasty bruise, but nothing worse.

He set about cleaning cuts and scrapes, bandaging them up, feeling for fractured ribs while they talked about the fight, about the tournament letter left behind.

"Fucking bold as shit to come into someone's home and try to steal their stuff for a stupid fucking tournament," Bobby said hissing as Johnny cleaned the cuts on his hands, the broken skin from all the punches landed.

"Inane," Tommy said.

"Thank you Mr. SAT questions," Jimmy said rolling his eyes.

Johnny heard the sound of the truck and heard the door open.

"In here," Johnny called.

"Got room for some more?" Dutch asked.

Johnny turned to look at them wide-eyed at his tone.

Dutch had Daniel under one arm, carefully helping him in.

Mr. Miyagi following with them.

Daniel's left arm was covered in blood.

"His arm went through a window," Dutch said. "Really getting sick of this Mike Barnes. I went by the shop to chat and drop off the Down Stairs club tickets for Jessica's going away party and she brought dinner and then the next thing we knew the guy and his goons descended on us. Bastard kicked Jessica in the stomach. She's home safe and sound with instructions to take care of the bruise and we told her how to check her ribs, but man, what a fucking piece of shit."

"Are you okay?" Daniel asked studying Johnny, worried.

"I got home *after* the fact," Johnny said. "I'm fine."

He carefully looked at Daniel's arm. There were still bits of glass. Jimmy was explaining what had happened to Mr. Miyagi.

"How the hell do they know where you live?" Tommy asked with a frown as Dutch sat down on Johnny's other side.

"Boys okay?" Mr. Miyagi asked tone worried, looking them over.

"Yeah, we're okay Mr. Miyagi. And we protected your bonsai. They tried to steal them. But hey, double-check they didn't sneak off with any of them. It was dark. I think we got them all but check and let us know," Bobby said.

"I got their plates," Tommy said bitterly. "So we'll call the police if anything is missing."

"Hai," Mr. Miyagi said. "Thank you."

He walked off to go count the bonsai after confirming Johnny had it handled.

"Shouldn't we call the police *anyway*?" Daniel asked wincing as Johnny carefully plucked pieces out of his skin setting them in a bowl, cleaning the wounds, and studying them trying to decide if Daniel would need stitches.

It looked so far that it would be okay.

"Police are shit about this kind of thing. Unless we've got more evidence."

"Isn't all this evidence?" Daniel asked motioning at them all.

"Yeah, you'd think," Jimmy said. "But you walk into the station and tell them there's some karate feud happening and they'll just laugh."

"Honestly we already *tried* to see if we could get you a restraining order but it didn't go through," Bobby said softly.

"Seriously?" Dutch asked eyes wide.

Mr. Miyagi came back and turned on the kettle to make tea.

Johnny finished up Daniel's arm.

He poured them all cups of tea and then took the green powder and made a paste, working through the group, chuckling at the response to the smell. Patting them on the shoulder or arms.

"Help heal," he said.

Between the two of them, all five were bandaged up and slathered in goop.

"All bonsai accounted for?" Johnny asked.

"Hai," Mr. Miyagi said. "All safe. Thanks to boys."

"What are we going to do?" Daniel asked. "They'll come back unless I sign the damn paperwork. What if it's worse next time? The shop is

trashed and we're supposed to open soon. They're not going to stop until I sign the tournament paperwork."

"Maybe you just have to sign the paperwork," Jimmy said.

"But he can't," Dutch said with a frown.

"Yeah, but they don't *know* that right?"

"No, but-"

"So sign the paperwork, show up and when you get there show your ID. The guy at the front will be like *whoopsie, you can't actually compete.* And you can go *aw man, I tried.* Just you know shrug at Mike Barnes and be like *I did what you wanted it's out of my hands*. It's a loophole, exploit it."

"But what if I have to still fight? If that doesn't work? I'm not strong enough to take them."

"You'll have to train," Bobby said.

"Mr. Miyagi? Will you train me?"

"Kata, hai, but not for tournament," Mr. Miyagi said.

"It's fine," Dutch said.

"How's it fine? I can't compete without a sensei."

"We'll start training. Jessica and I have been going for morning runs at like 5 am, come with us. I can spar with you some days and on the weekends the guys can spar with you, right?" Dutch asked.

"Yeah, I need to get back in fighting shape anyway, that was, eye-opening," Bobby said with a frown. "My dreams of being an ass-kicking pastor kind of went up in smoke tonight. I liked that dream."

"When your arm heals, another good workout might be to go rock climbing with Jessica," Johnny said. "She was telling me how much she loves it."

"It sounds like Jessica is going to train me," Daniel said with a laugh. "She might not ever want to see me again after tonight."

Daniel's cheek was red, it'd bruise.

Johnny got up to get him an ice pack.

"I doubt that. Besides she goes like at least once a week to go climbing. Invited me to go with her. I'm sure it extends to you too."

"You think, huh?" Daniel asked, eyes following Johnny.

Johnny returned with his ice pack gently holding it to Daniel's cheek.

"Yes. It's how she likes to spend her weekends. She told me the more the merrier."

Daniel's hand came up over Johnny's, warm to the opposite of the cold of the ice pack.

Johnny hated that they were all hurt.

Hoped that they got good hits in, burnt Barnes and his friends so that they'd think twice before coming back again.

Maybe he should also go back to training. Just in case.

He hadn't had a chance to spar much, he'd been mostly doing kata which was a good workout, and so was lifting bales of hay for the horses and cows at the sanctuary, and carrying children off to bed, but it wasn't the same.

Maybe he'd join them for their runs...

5 am.

He liked sleeping in.

Running at 5am meant getting up at 4am at least.

He didn't want to do that. He used to do that all the time.

But now he liked sleeping in. He *liked* sleeping. Now that it wasn't littered with nightmares. Now that he woke up to Daniel playing with his hair or his soft breath against him.

The phone rang.

Mr. Miyagi's hands were full. He was making dinner now, food for all the guys.

Johnny carefully transferred the ice pack into Daniel's hands and got

up to get the phone.

"Miyagi residence," he said.

"Johnny! How have you been! Did you have a good birthday?" Mrs. LaRusso asked.

"Yes, Mrs. LaRusso," Johnny said turning to look at Daniel to see if he wanted to talk to his Mom. "I got my gifts, thank you. I think we're going to make a pie this weekend. And please thank um Nonnio and Nonnia for me as well."

Daniel was looking at him, getting up carefully, a little wobblily, hissing as he tried to push himself up with the injured side.

Mrs. LaRusso had launched into telling him about an orchard the family-owned and about her award-winning pies.

He bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from saying something to Daniel, a gentle reminder to be careful, he didn't want to worry Mrs. LaRusso.

It was up to Daniel if he wanted to tell her.

Daniel leaned his uninjured side against the wall holding out his hand.

Johnny waited for her to take a breath, which was a daunting task. Fingers curling in the phone cord, waiting for a moment between peach season and cousins to tell her Daniel was there. It took longer than he wanted, but he jumped when she stopped for a breath, telling her, "it sounds like fun, and here's Daniel Mrs. LaRusso. I'll talk to you later."

He handed the phone over with escaped back to the table.

Mr. Miyagi had finished cooking and the guys ate quietly thanking him. Leaning over bowls of noodles, it looked like ramen.

"You spending the night?" Johnny asked quietly.

"Of fucking course," Dutch whispered back. "There's no way we're leaving you guys alone this weekend. Not with Barnes out there."

He made it sound like Barnes was a violent escaped animal from the zoo or some monster in the darkness. But looking at his friends, at Daniel it did seem like it.

If he didn't know what Barnes looked like he might've thought that he was the guy who'd broken into the house that time before. But something Tommy said made sense. It was a good question.

Mrs. Douglas kept track of all the information for the competitors which included addresses, but last year Daniel's address had been South Seas.

Mr. Miyagi's address wouldn't have been on the paperwork.

They shouldn't have known he'd moved in with him, but they had.

They'd even sent the paperwork about the new rules to Mr. Miyagi's for Daniel.

How did they know where to find Daniel?

First the shop and now the house.

He turned looking at the fireplace, towards the front door thinking.

Mr. Miyagi's medal of valor was hanging up.

He got up and walked over, trying to remember where he'd seen the man in the house.

There were the yellow flyers that he grabbed every day by the door to give their neighbors to tell them about their opening day. It had the shop's address and phone number on it.

The man who came into the house must've given it to Mike Barnes.

He knew where Mr. Miyagi lived and had started to send Mike Barnes to the shop first, and then they'd come that night expecting no one to be home. Only to find the guys. They were trying to corner Mr. Miyagi and Daniel.

Why?

What would've happened if they'd lost the bonsai?

They would've lost all of their stock.

They didn't have enough money to get more. So it would've forced their hand to do something drastic to stay afloat.

But they wouldn't have had to.

Johnny would've gone to his mother or the guys.

Mr. Miyagi wouldn't have accepted it outright. But maybe as a loan with zero interest.

They were trying to make it as miserable as possible, uncomfortable to force Daniel's hand. To be a part of a tournament he didn't want to be in. Couldn't be in.

They didn't know about Johnny. Whoever was doing their research hadn't seen him yet. But he'd seen *them*. Which gave him the element of surprise. But how would he use it? Could he? Should he?

He walked back and sat down with a frown.

"Everything okay?" Tommy asked.

"Maybe not, let me keep thinking about it," Johnny said.

Daniel came back after a while with a smile on his face. Still holding the ice pack to his face, he sat down to eat with the guys and Mr. Miyagi.

He told Johnny more about the fight. About Jessica bringing over mac and cheese and the first prototype of the pots for the bonsai. Telling him how perfect the pot was.

After dinner, Johnny worried about the tense atmosphere.

Daniel had been smiling, a good conversation with his mother, but it had soured, fallen into darkness as he had shared the awfulness of the night.

Johnny looked at Mr. Miyagi who seemed to be trying to remain positive.

Reminding Daniel that nothing had happened to the bonsai.

There was a little spark.

Daniel was tired of getting hurt and the gentle positive outlook Mr. Miyagi was trying to remind him of that there was at least one bright side was clashing.

Johnny took Daniel's hand in his.

"Mr. Miyagi, let's play hanafuda tonight," Johnny said.

The guys couldn't resist games and Daniel would hopefully calm back down if Johnny held his hand, if he stayed close, if he occasionally pressed his leg to Daniel's the way Daniel used to do to his, reminding him he was there and solid and nothing else was going to happen that night and that he wasn't alone.

Daniel wasn't adrift at sea in a storm on his own trying to understand Mr. Miyagi, trying to make sense of the situation, trying to solve problems

He had Johnny and the guys.

He turned to Daniel as Mr. Miyagi passed out the cards, as he explained how to play.

"I'm here, not going anywhere," he said softly in Daniel's ear. "Whatever you need."

Daniel looked up at him, brown eyes wide, studying for the exact meaning of the statement.

If Daniel wanted to end the fight Johnny would help.

If Daniel wanted to train, he'd train with him.

If Daniel wanted to just stay in bed and avoid the world, well Johnny could be there too, under the blankets.

He'd repair the shop as many times as needed.

Daniel pressed his forehead into Johnny's shoulder.

He knew it was awful. His mother was across the country. His family was across the country. His other adopted parent who supported him was looking on the bright side when Daniel wanted answers and actions. Wanted this to stop.

Johnny ran his fingers through Daniel's hair, ducking his head while the guys asked about the sake cup, how it was an animal which made him smile, reminding him of the garden in Okinawa and Sato. They'd like each other he thought.

"It sucks. It all really fucking sucks. The shop will recover. I'll put it back together as many times as it falls apart and I'll patch you up too. Every time you make a new enemy. We'll be 70 and I'll still have your back when someone tries to pick a fight with you over pizza or pasta

or food or cars. You'll win against Barnes the way you won against Chozen, against me, the way you'll win against whoever hopefully doesn't come next, but if they do you'll win then too. Focus on the plan. Morning runs with Dutch and Jessica, some rock climbing, kata," Johnny whispered. "You just tell me what you want me to do and I'll help."

Johnny's shoulder felt wet, he gently wrapped his arms around Daniel trying to be mindful of everywhere he and Mr. Miyagi had patched up as Mr. Miyagi tried to explain the different sets. They'd get through this night, and every other night after it.

Rebuilding

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was raining in the morning, a rarity in LA, that for a moment Daniel thought he was in Okinawa or Newark. But with Johnny's arm around him, he knew he wasn't in Newark. The soft snoring coming from the floor meant he wasn't in Okinawa either.

He pushed himself up carefully wincing. It was going to be a long day of repairing the shop.

They'd also have to find a safe spot to put the bonsai, somewhere where Barnes and his friends couldn't get to them.

Johnny's arm had fallen around his waist and he turned to look at him, the arm tightened around his waist. He was sleeping peacefully.

Daniel wondered when that had happened. He smiled softly, reaching out to touch the blonde hair that was starting to get a little long.

He could hear the rain pouring outside, the crack of lightning, and the rumble of thunder.

Johnny didn't even stir, breathing soft. It was after seven according to the red glow of the alarm clock.

The guys were sleeping on the floor, on the bedding they'd gotten out for them, that was pretty much theirs at this point. A little nest of ex-cobras at the foot of his bed.

Sometimes it was frustrating to have them there. But he was glad they were there now. That they hadn't been alone through the night.

All the places he felt safe in California were gone.

Seven Seas, the shop, everywhere except for right there. In his bed with Johnny and the guys sleeping on the floor.

One day he'd have to get them something more comfortable to sleep on.

He didn't like that Mike Barnes had been there too. He hadn't come in

the house but had been so close.

Johnny hadn't ever come to his place, there were a lot of lines Johnny never crossed. Chozen *had* but, it was different.

Johnny had cared about Ali, and it'd been fun to rile him up, especially when he'd agreed not to fight Daniel.

Chozen cared about honor and his uncle's honor. They just hadn't understood one another. Eventually ended up on the same page.

But Barnes only seemed to care about wanting to beat the shit out of Daniel.

Johnny had more guys on his side than Chozen or Barnes, but Bobby had always held back.

These guys with Barnes were mindless like Mike Barnes had trained them well enough and he just had to point and say go and they'd go.

His shoulder hurt.

The windows at the store were broken.

He didn't trust that things were going to be okay.

Everything always got worse first and if this was just the beginning, then-

Johnny sat up looking at him bleary-eyed for a couple of seconds then shifting. He sat up, pulling Daniel into his arms, wrapping the blanket around him. One second Johnny was sleeping at his side and the next Daniel was leaning back against him bundled up like a half-asleep Johnny had mistaken him for a burrito. The thought was amusing.

"You're safe," Johnny murmured softly next to his ear. Breath on Daniel's ear warm and it sent a shiver down his spine.

"They know where I live Johnny," Daniel said softly, turning to look at him, trying to get an arm out of the blankets around him.

"They do," Johnny said. "But there are a lot of things they don't know."

"Yeah like, what?" Daniel asked, practically a huff.

He'd been trying to wiggle an arm out, but Johnny had done an impressively good job.

He got one hand out and Johnny caught it in his as it swung up faster than he'd expected once it'd no longer been pinned down.

Johnny pulled his hand back and Daniel watched as Johnny brought his hand up to his lips and gently kissed the top of his hand, eyes looking on him the whole time.

"They don't know how dangerous these hands can be, that the fact you don't want to fight is for their own good."

Daniel laughed, a soft exhale of laughter. But it died when he saw Johnny wasn't teasing, wasn't laughing. His eyes were serious.

"Johnny," he managed, trying to figure out how to explain that Barnes wasn't like everyone else. Like even fighting Chozen or Johnny had been scary. He didn't have the same confidence in himself, and he was tired. He wanted to be left alone. He wanted someone else to take care of it for him. Like the police.

Daniel squeezed his hand, the hand that held his.

He did appreciate Johnny being there though, awake. He was glad he wasn't alone.

Johnny looked down at their hands and then sighed burying his head in the crook of Daniel's neck.

Daniel felt lips press against his neck, the gentle graze of teeth on his skin. Another bruise to add to the collection, but this one was being so lovingly administered that it wasn't the same at all. Though he hated that he was all wrapped up in a blanket so he couldn't turn and wrap himself around Johnny.

He'd only freed the one arm and he hooked it up and to the top of Johnny's head, fingers in his hair, letting out a small gasp as Johnny found a sensitive spot of his neck to suck on.

Daniel managed to free himself from the blankets and turned, clapping hands to either side of his face. "Don't."

"Don't?"

"Don't get hurt. Avoid Barnes. You see him, take those long legs of yours and run."

Johnny kissed him.

The guys had woken part of the way through their make-out session and turned into the most embarrassing peanut gallery Daniel had ever had to deal with. Scaring Johnny off and scandalizing Daniel.

At breakfast, they discussed what to do with the trees.

Dutch offered for them to stay at his place. It had the best security out of everyone's house and he was home. Unlike the rest of the guys.

Mr. Miyagi reluctantly agreed to store the stock at Dutch's, caving easily when Dutch reminded him that they'd taken care of Johnny's bonsai over the time they were in Okinawa.

Mr. Miyagi helped load the bonsai after breakfast into Dutch's van in the rain, telling them he'd get a headstart of cleaning up the shop.

They drove out to Dutch's place. He had to lean over at the gate to punch in a code to get through the gates and then drove up a long winding road to a house bigger than Sid's or Jimmy's. But it was so far from the main road you'd never know it was there.

Instead of going into the mansion, Dutch led them and the small parade of bonsai through the rain to a glass conservatory on the property.

He fussed with another keypad and then hauled the door open, propping it open with a brick.

It was beautiful. Flowering plants, trees, and butterflies.

"Keep an eye on Johnny," Dutch said softly to Daniel. "I always lose him in here."

That made sense, Daniel thought. He didn't want to leave either.

"Shit," Dutch said. "Johnny grab Mr. P. He's making a break for it."

Daniel turned to see a peacock strutting with purpose for the door and Johnny stepping out in front of it, arms out wide blocking the door. The peacock eyed him for a moment before turning like he'd just been curious and wasn't trying to make a break for it.

Johnny didn't move from his post watching the peacock suspiciously and the peacock after a couple of feet turned back, clocked that Johnny was still watching him, ruffled his feathers, and continued on

deeper into the conservatory.

Mr. P only tried to run three more times. He snuck out past Daniel who had been carrying one of the last of the bonsai and had spun on his heels as the bright flash of feathers ducked around him and out into the rain.

The peacock hurried off towards Dutch's van, pecking at the wheels, before looking around and turning back to Daniel, eyes full of challenge.

Daniel did not want to have to chase a peacock around the grounds when Dutch came up at his side with a sigh.

"Mr. P, you hate the outside, it raining, you hate that, what are you even doing?"

He held up a box and shook it.

Mr. P who had been stubbornly preening in the rain, looking a little miserable but not budging on principal, his head shot up at the sound. He ducked down, running fast back into the conservatory past Daniel's feet, before flapping his wings, sprinkling him with water and flopping onto a cushion Daniel hadn't noticed amongst all the flowers.

He tried to think of any of the guys having pets. He hadn't noticed, but a peacock was not what he would've ever thought Dutch had. But there were a lot of things he hadn't expected. Dutch filled a nearby dish with food, then turned back and looked at Daniel who was setting down the last bonsai.

"Where's Johnny?" Dutch asked.

Daniel looked around, looked at the other guys who looked around trying to spot the tall blonde.

Dutch sighed rubbing his face.

"You know, once upon a time I thought about setting a damn bed in here and just letting Johnny move in, but my parents use this for parties when they're home, and never give me a heads-up, but I swear he's as bad as Mr. P. Oh if you see Mrs. P, be careful she likes to peck at ankles."

"How come I've never been in here?" Bobby asked.

"Because my parents don't like when people come over. Plus your house has baked goods. It's better," Dutch said with a shrug.

"Oh, so they like Johnny better than me huh?" Bobby asked teasing. "Better than all of us?"

"They do," Dutch said flatly. "He took care of me while I was sick and they wanted to give him something as like thanks and he declined. Everyone *always* wants something from them so they were kind of stunned. So they gave him a free pass. If I'd asked they probably *would've* let him move in, but then they would've forgotten and been confused as to why I put Johnny's room in the conservatory. Ugh let's see, sometimes he likes the bees. Let's check there."

"Bees?" Jimmy asked with a frown. "Why do you have bees?"

"Honey," Dutch said with a shrug. "Plus I liked bees as a kid. My parents set it up when I was like five. Not the best gift for a five-year-old. But I liked bugs, there's a shit ton of bugs in here."

"Won't the peacocks eat your bees?" Tommy asked.

"They could if they're pissy at me. But they eat like royalty so they know better. Plus the bees sting them," Dutch said.

They followed him around large ponds filled with frogs, lily pads, and large koi fish down a path and there was Johnny.

He was setting a jar down on a table, bees buzzing about. He glanced up.

"You haven't been dealing with the honey," Johnny said pointing to the honeycomb build-up on the outside of the box.

"I've been busy," Dutch said with a shrug. "It doesn't hurt them. It's just messy. It's not like a bear's going to break in or something."

A white peacock was sneaking towards Johnny who was carefully putting honeycomb into a jar. A hand fell on Daniel's shoulder, he glanced at Dutch.

"Don't tell him," he said in a soft whisper. He had a look of mischief in his eyes.

Mrs. P's head came back poised to peck at Johnny's ankle.

Johnny shifted his foot back and she missed.

She tried again and he moved again, eyes not leaving the work he was doing.

Mrs. P ruffled her feathers in frustration Daniel felt like he understood.

Johnny dipped down pulling something out of his jacket pocket and setting it on the ground.

She ate it and he stepped around her gathering up the jars.

"Damn, I forgot you're used to Mrs. P," Dutch sighed.

"Hoping I got pecked?" Johnny asked amused, passing jars to Bobby, Tommy, and Jimmy.

"What do you want us to do with this?" Tommy asked looking at the jar with a frown.

"Eat it."

"It's honeycomb," Jimmy said.

"Yeah, put it in your tea or something," Johnny said with a shrug.

"You're giving out my honey," Dutch said with a frown that didn't reach his eyes, looking amused.

"I believe last time I was here you told me *please help me get rid of the honey any chance you're here. I can't keep up,*" Johnny said.

"I did say that, didn't I? Is that why you left the group? I was worried we were going to lose you in here," Dutch said.

Johnny looked at him, head tilted slightly. "You know why Mr. and Mrs. P like it in here?"

"Bugs?" Dutch asked amused. "The things they like most are in here and not out there."

"Yes, and the things I like the best live *out there*," Johnny said eyes falling on Daniel as he motioned around the outside.

Dutch clapped Daniel on the back before turning.

"Okay, well is there any other cleaning you want to do here or shall we go clean up the shop?" Dutch asked.

"Just wanted to bail out a little honey," Johnny said shifting the jars in his hands. "That's it. I'm not going to go bug-catching or something. Besides, you should give some to your Taekwondo teacher and classmates."

"Who are those jars for?" Dutch asked motioning towards Johnny's arms.

"The house and Jessica. I think after getting kicked by Barnes she needs a pick me up."

The playful nature in Dutch's eyes fled. "Yeah," he said quietly, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Fuck Barnes."

"We'll check in on her today," Johnny said. "She's right across the street from the shop."

"Good," Bobby said. "I don't know who Barnes's sensei is but the fact he's beating up girls pisses me off."

"Mrs. Douglas didn't know who his sensei is," Johnny said softly, his hand finding Daniels.

They walked past the bonsai and Mr. P and Daniel felt relieved that they were all safe.

Jessica came by the shop around lunch.

The place was looking better.

Jimmy had called someone to rush repair the glass and they rebuilt shelves and most of the screens.

They'd gotten a lot done throughout the morning and Daniel was feeling better.

Mr. Miyagi had gotten there early and had listened while Daniel told him all about the conservatory and the peacocks and the bees and showed him the honey Johnny had harvested.

They had planned to go over to check on Jessica around lunch but she'd beaten them to it.

"What do you want for lunch?" Tommy asked her.

"Pizza?" she suggested.

"On it," he said walking over to the phone to make an order.

Mr. Miyagi walked over to her talking softly handing her a small jar of green goop he'd made that morning.

Daniel had wondered who that had been for. If he was sending some home with the guys.

She was nodding and then walked across the floor to him, looking around as she went.

"I was going to come and help you clean up," she said taking in everything. "But it looks like you're mostly done."

"Yeah, we put everyone to work," Daniel said with a soft smile.

"What's Johnny doing?" she asked softly.

Daniel turned.

Johnny had thought he could repair the shoji screen Daniel fell through and had been sitting in the back of the shop trying to put it back together again.

The special mulberry paper was in a roll next to him.

They'd repaired doors in Okinawa after the storm, it was similar, Johnny had been injured but had still tried to help.

Daniel was pretty sure this one was beyond repair though. He'd fallen on it pretty hard, it wasn't like when, was it, Dennis? Dennis had just broken the paper.

"Being stubborn," Daniel said fondly.

"I know why you, Dutch, and I are bruised, what happened to the other guys?" Jessica asked softly.

"Barnes."

"When?" she asked eyes wide.

"They apparently went to the house last night to try and steal the bonsai."

Her hand came to his arm, his left one and he winced.

She pulled away, eyes still full of concern.

"Did they get the bonsai?"

"With a house full of ex-cobras? No. But they're miffed that Barnes got *any* hits in. We weren't expecting them to come to the house."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to sign the damn paperwork."

"But Daniel-"

"I can't compete, I'm too old," he said with a soft smile. "But I'll just pretend. And I'll train just in case something weird happens and I have to go through with it. Speaking of which, apparently you and Dutch get up at ungodly hours to go running?"

The concern on her face turned into a soft smile.

"Yeah, you wanna join?" she asked.

Daniel heaved a big sigh. He didn't want to. But he felt like it'd be a good idea.

"Yeah."

She laughed.

"We can get smoothies after. With wheatgrass and protein."

Daniel looked at her in horror.

"Who are you? Are you the same girl who brought us mac and cheese? Who literally just asked for a pizza for lunch?"

"Hey, It's good for you," Jessica said with a grin. "Besides it evens everything else out."

"Does it?"

She laughed. "You're training, it's good to use *good* fuel for that."

"I'm going to regret this," Daniel complained. "I knew I shouldn't have relaxed after the deathmatch was over. I let my guard down. Got

comfortable."

"Deathmatch?" Jessica asked while Daniel carried his mop over to the corner.

A spot in the roof was leaking.

There had been more but Johnny had spotted that weeks ago and had fixed the roof.

Daniel didn't want to tell him he'd missed a spot. He was so determined to fix the last screen.

He caught Tommy's eye. Tommy's eyes followed the drip up to the ceiling and then he picked up the phone again.

The plus of having Johnny do it was it was *free* labor. Which he knew he shouldn't take advantage of him, but they hadn't made money yet.

Daniel did not want to see how much it'd cost to fix the windows, or how much the phone call Tommy was making would cost.

"I'll tell you on our run tomorrow. It'll give me something to complain about other than running," he said with an amused smile.

"Fine, I guess that will give me something to look forward to, other than running circles around you," she said with a teasing smile.

"Johnny said you also go rock climbing?"

"Yeah! I do. I've been trying to get him to come along, you want to come with?"

"It's a good work out right?"

"Yes! It's great."

She sounded so excited. Daniel was tired already.

"Yeah, sign us up for that one too. You're essentially my new coach," he said with a sigh.

She grinned and patted his back.

"Don't worry, we'll get you back in fighting shape in no time."

Daniel sighed. "Yeah, for a fight I'm not planning to fight, but for a

fight, I'm worried I might have to."

"If you fought someone to the *death* Daniel I'm pretty sure you can handle Barnes."

She was so confident.

Even though he doubted it he had to admit, it was better than doing everything on his own. Better than when he'd tried to teach himself karate from a book.

It'd be different this time. He had friends by his side, a base knowledge, and two big wins under his belt. He really had earned his black belt.

The pizza came and they sat around one of the repaired tables eating.

The guys were talking about UCLA and answering Jessica's questions about college. She was thinking of next semester. She'd taken the semester off as a gap year to be in LA and to get some sun and try something new.

It was nice to sit with them and eat pizza on the floor and to talk and listen to Mr. Miyagi mention school, the school he went to, the classes he'd taken.

Jessica also teased him by telling them he was getting up early tomorrow to go for a run and asking if the guys if they wanted to come with. All bright and excited.

They groaned. Dutch was coming, that was a given.

But they sighed, their egos bruised, agreeing to come along Sunday morning.

Johnny sighed. "I'm not going to have a choice tomorrow huh?"

Bobby laughed throwing his arm around Johnny's shoulder easily. "Nope, if we're here on the weekend and going, you have to too."

Tommy had been taking notes in a notebook and after he finished his slice of pizza looked up.

"Okay," he said looking from Mr. Miyagi to Daniel. "So I called a security company. There's going to be a lock on the door and the gates. For the shop and the house. From what I can tell they've been coming while you've been in here after hours. There's a way to set the

lock so you can get out, but they won't be able to get in. So we're going to set it for that after hours. Getting you a pin code lock too, so Jessica can come in and out, or you know, us. For the house, you've got the three entrances to the garden. The main gate and then a couple of others. I didn't realize part of the fence opened up into a door in the back until Barnes and his friends escaped that way yesterday. So we're turning that back into an actual unmovable piece of fence and putting a lock on the rest of the gates. And your front door. Mr. Miyagi, I know this probably isn't what you want, but people are getting in, and I just don't think it's safe otherwise."

Daniel expected Mr. Miyagi to brush off their concern, to tell them everything was fine because there were still good things in the world, and that Barnes and his friends would just go away. That optimism that had gotten under Daniel's skin the night before.

But Mr. Miyagi nodded, "Hai, good idea."

Daniel studied Mr. Miyagi.

He usually always brushed things off, but maybe he understood that people breaking into the grounds of the house was a problem. A reminder of the awful parts of Okinawa when Chozen had tried to destroy the house. Maybe he understood that they wouldn't go away.

Maybe he could ask if he'd teach Daniel again. He felt the question well up but he swallowed it down.

He wanted Mr. Miyagi to focus on his dream. On the shop. Not worry about him or the tournament, and Mr. Miyagi had already made it clear how he felt about the tournament.

He felt better though, having a game plan.

He'd sign the paperwork, maybe he'd go to the All-Valley offices and do it.

Or the next time he saw Barnes, whichever happened first.

And then maybe he could finally enjoy the shop. Finally, get it ready without fear of Barnes and his goons trashing it.

He could enjoy a shop full of little trees and answering the phones and talking to customers and casually flirting with Johnny when it got slow. When he got bored.

He'd start his mornings off early in a routine, running with Dutch and Jessica and drinking green smoothies full of weird things that were good for him, and he'd come to the shop and get it ready, or if there was enough time he'd go home and shower and maybe crawl back into bed with Johnny for awhile. Using the endorphins and adrenaline to try and coax a little more pleasure out of his mornings, a reward for himself for getting up early and running, getting to wake Johnny up, and offer a different type of workout.

He liked that idea. But he worried he'd be too tired to even attempt it with how excited Dutch and Jessica were.

It had sounded awful, but the more he mulled it over, maybe getting up early would have it's perks, maybe he'd find ways to spin training into something fun.

He wondered if he could mark sex as an extra workout. Tell Johnny in a teasing way that it was training. It'd get his heart pounding for sure, burn a few more calories.

His hand found Johnny's thigh next to him. It might be fun.

They could make this awful situation better.

Chapter End Notes

> So the burrito wrap is an actual calming technique. Here's some info on it. I picked it because you're supposed to do it with babies and animals and Johnny's been kind of dealing with both so it was an automatic reaction when he was half asleep. Like oh, where's Daniel? Oh there's Daniel. He looks stressed, when the kids or the animals are stressed they get burrito wrapped. So Daniel gets burrito wrapped.
>
> Also, I wanted Dutch's place to be ridiculous thus the pet peacocks. Also naming pets is hard and kid Dutch wasn't creative so it's just Mr. and Mrs. Peacock or Mr. and Mrs. P for short.
>
> Sometimes bees just do not care, thus Johnny just getting honey and honeycomb like it's nothing. He learned that from Dutch, because Dutch would not be scared of his bees since he got them at 5 and would've figured that out long before they met. I also figure if his parents don't like people that much they'd be growing as much of their own stuff aka their own chickens for eggs and thus their own bees for honey in the conservatory. Even though they're not home much. I also wanted each of the guys to have a

spot that they were like well if things explode with Sid and Johnny needs somewhere to go this is where he's staying. But the problem with Dutch's is that the conservatory is also used for business meetings so there are too many people in there from time to time, so that's why it's not on Johnny's list of places to go to, because any second it might need to be some polished place that a bloody/bruised kid wouldn't be welcome in. (Though he'd always be welcome, but you know how Johnny is/was).

Finding a way back into a rhythm

Chapter Notes

Big diversion from the canon because of previous changes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Five am found Johnny standing sleepily outside of a park with Jessica who was bouncing on her feet and Dutch who was stretching, warming up.

Daniel was waking up, slowly, mumbling to himself about a reward system that Johnny couldn't understand.

Johnny wanted to know when Dutch had become a morning person, let alone a morning runner.

It had to be taekwondo.

Johnny *used* to be a morning person.

Sleeping in hadn't been safe and then Kreese gave him such an intense workout schedule that he slept most of the time.

He wondered if it was similar. If Dutch had found a teacher who was inspiring him. Enough so to get him up and moving so early.

Jessica was thanking him for the honey at his side.

The rest of the guys were complaining and yawning.

Johnny stretched.

He could remember how to do this again.

He'd just gotten comfortable. Complacent.

Kreese would yell at them for getting lazy and letting their guards down, would say that was *exactly* why someone like Barnes had shown up.

He'd smelt blood in the water, noticed they weren't paying attention. Weren't guarding their weak spots.

"It's from Dutch's bees," Johnny said.

"You have bees?" Jessica said turning to Dutch.

"Yeah," Dutch said with a shrug.

Like everyone has bees or like she'd asked if he had a TV. No big deal.

"Ready?" Jessica asked brightly.

Wide awake for five am. Full of energy.

Johnny remembered what it was like to not need sleep. It'd been nice.

No. He shouldn't think like that.

He'd really enjoyed his lazy mornings, lazy days.

Johnny nodded.

Reminded himself to pace himself.

This wasn't a race, even though he was looking at the guys who were complaining about being awake, he thought *maybe* if it was a race he could win.

He probably would win.

He hadn't really taken time off since they'd quit Cobra Kai to stop working out.

They'd just been sitting around studying.

He'd been doing manual labor. His muscles hadn't gone away.

He'd just been using them differently.

It wasn't a race.

He'd pace himself.

It wasn't really a run, per se in Johnny's opinion.

A gentle jog.

He found himself turning around and bouncing on his feet with Jessica while they waited for the others to catch up.

"See," Jessica said looking at him with a grin. "It's not so bad."

"The problem is," Johnny said. "I haven't had a chance to sleep in much in my life, so I've been enjoying it."

"So I shouldn't expect to see you often?" she asked.

"Maybe not tomorrow. Daniel was mumbling something to himself about the only fun part of this would be coming home to me. And I don't know what's happening in that 5 am brain of his, but I guess I'll find out tomorrow. The true test will be to see if I can continue to sleep after he leaves. It'll be a good experiment."

Jessica laughed softly.

"Is that what he's been mumbling about? He promised to tell me about his death match, whatever that even means. But he's been too distracted."

"Death match is exactly as it sounds. Happened in Okinawa over the summer."

"What? Who goes to Okinawa and gets in a death match? Wait," she turned to him grabbing his arm and looking up at him wide-eyed. "Does that mean Daniel's killed someone?"

Johnny laughed.

"He showed mercy."

"Okay okay, I need more context. Why did you go to Okinawa?"

"You do know if Daniel promised to tell you you're going to hear all of this again the next time you go running right? Just wait and let him tell you."

"You were there right? Tell me *something*," she complained.

"To be fair I was knocked out for the majority of the fight."

She pouted.

"Convenient. Was it like this Barnes guy?"

"Chozen was obsessed with honor but had like the wrong understanding of what it meant. He seemed to think it meant unquestionable respect. That he and his family were in the right *always*, even when tricking others. Any inconvenience was a slight on his honor. He didn't seem to realize it didn't make sense. Because it's

what he'd been taught. He was following in his uncle's footsteps and he hadn't realized his uncle was wrong."

"Sounds like you got to know him," she said looking at him before turning to continue to run as the guys caught up.

He followed.

"I understood it. It's hard to realize the person you believed in or trusted was wrong, taught you the wrong things. Chozen's lucky though, his uncle is trying to be better and so he."

Sato never tried to kill Chozen and Kreese would never change.

That was the difference.

Johnny was happy for Chozen to have that.

Knew *he'd* never have that. But he had other things and it'd be fine.

"And Barnes?" Jessica asked.

"No clue. That's the weird thing. He just wants Daniel to fight him. Something about money."

"Money is a big motivator."

"But the All-Valley doesn't give you money. You get a trophy."

"Oh."

She was quiet for a while as they ran, mulling this over. Thinking.

Johnny kept checking back periodically that Daniel and the guys were still there.

Dutch was keeping up with Daniel, and Daniel was talking, mumbling something as they went.

Dutch was listening valiantly, keeping pace.

Like he was herding Daniel, keeping him with the group.

He probably should be doing that.

"I think I'm going to go back and try and keep Daniel company," Johnny said. "That okay?"

"Yeah. Of course," she said slowing her pace as well.

"Oh ho! Look whose finally slowing down! Tired huh?" Bobby called as they neared.

"I think they just missed us, finally realized we're not all long-legged monsters," Jimmy said.

"I thought we would've been more evenly matched, now that we're all out of karate," Tommy said with a pout. "I forgot Johnny won every race at school."

"Sorry, guys," Johnny said.

"Don't have to slow down on our account, we don't need your pity," Jimmy said.

"I missed you, but-"

"Oh he's slowing down more," Tommy said surprised as they passed him.

"Ohhh someone realized they've been a bad boyfriend," Jimmy said with a laugh. "You know it's weird for Johnny to be behind us and not being on a track."

"Hey Jessica, thanks for putting up with all of us. But you don't have to slow down on our account," Bobby said.

Johnny heard her laugh. "It's fine, this is more fun."

Dutch slapped his shoulder when Johnny slowed down enough to meet him and Daniel.

"I'm going to join the guys and Jessica. Good luck man, he's uh...something this early in the morning."

Dutch picked up the pace easier, joining the small crowd ahead of them, like he was relieved to be ahead.

Johnny really shouldn't have focused on keeping up with Jessica. Should've stuck by Daniel's side since the start.

It'd be the slowest jog in his life, but it'd be fun.

Daniel looked up at him with a frown.

"Wait, why are you back here?"

"Wanted to run with you," Johnny said.

"I didn't mind you running ahead."

"Well I do," Johnny said amused. "Besides maybe if you get faster you'll have more fun the next time we spar."

He remembered how frustrated Daniel had gotten trying to catch him. Maybe that'd be a good carrot. Better than just going back to bed and cuddling.

Daniel was studying him, glancing up at him.

"I will add that to my goals. Get fast enough to actually catch you."

If it was anyone else Johnny would've taken part of that as a threat, but from Daniel, it was a promise of something else, especially with that look in his eyes.

Maybe he didn't want to cuddle.

Oh god, early morning Daniel was usually flirty.

Was that what Dutch had meant?

Johnny was used to it, or missed a lot of it.

He was still trying to figure it out. But Daniel always had been more touchy in the morning but in a slow lazy way.

Daniel was going to do this every morning? With friends? What had he been talking about in the back of the group?

What was the reward he wanted?

Johnny felt his ears burn. He knew what Daniel would say if he asked.

"You going to be okay to do this every morning?" Johnny asked. "With Jessica and Dutch?"

"Of course," Daniel said like he'd been challenged.

Revving up to accept the challenge, or bet, whatever Johnny was going to throw out.

"What are you going to talk about?"

Daniel blinked, clearly it wasn't what he'd expected Johnny to say.

"I don't know, Okinawa? Newark. We'll see."

"What were you talking to Dutch about?" Johnny asked, not sure if he actually wanted to know.

Daniel furrowed his brows with thought. Retracing his steps mentally trying to figure out what he'd been talking about.

He stopped suddenly.

Johnny bounced at his side.

"Fuck," Daniel said looking suddenly much more awake.

"Do I want to know?" Johnny asked watching as Daniel blushed.

Daniel buried his head in his hands.

"I was talking about what would make all this worth it."

"Yeah?" Johnny asked.

"Well, I think I just talked about how nice it was to watch you run. Probably for- oh god, how long have we been running?"

That didn't sound too bad.

Johnny had been fast, he always thought it was fun to watch runners shoot across the field when he was leaving school.

Johnny checked his watch.

He'd expected something worse.

"Half hour?"

"Oh god, a half-hour?"

"Come on, let's keep running."

Daniel sighed moving again.

He was quiet for a while but then he started talking again.

About the shop. About the windows and the shoji screens and why had Johnny been so stubborn? But Johnny had fixed it. So even though he was complaining he was also heaping praise on Johnny. How he could barely tell that it was the one he'd fallen through. How the whole place sparkled and how it felt like a bad dream if only his arm didn't hurt.

They eventually stopped at a picnic table in the park.

The guys collapsing in the dirt and on the benches.

"I'll get the smoothies," Johnny said looking at all of them. "So give me your orders."

"I'll come help carry," Jessica offered.

Johnny got mumbles and groans, but he pieced together orders from everyone.

Dutch wanted a tropical smoothie with spinach, kale, and protein powder.

The other orders were harder to parse together.

Johnny followed Jessica to the shop.

It wasn't too busy and the owner seemed to recognize Jessica, asked what happened to Dutch.

Johnny smiled, that was good for Dutch, to be known, asked after. He'd be delighted to hear about it.

He put the orders in, adding things to it as Jessica recommended, like dumping protein powder in every single one.

Daniel had just laid down on the bench in the park and looked up at Johnny, hair plastered to his forehead that Johnny brushed aside.

He told Johnny to surprise him.

So Johnny ordered him a chocolate and peanut butter banana smoothie. Maybe it was a bit early for chocolate and peanut butter, but he'd heard Daniel complain about green health smoothies for a good ten minutes.

He could treat himself to some green monstrosity the following day when he wasn't with Johnny.

Johnny was going to get him something sweet.

He got himself an acai berry drink that he totally butchered how to pronounce it and the worker completely unphased typed it in and repeated it back to him pronounced correctly.

The worker talked to Jessica congratulating her on her larger running group.

She laughed saying it was because their friends were visiting for the weekend from UCLA.

Johnny smiled. *Their* friends. The guys would be happy.

They carried their drinks in carriers back to the park.

The atmosphere was different.

Daniel was pacing, chewing on his bottom lip.

Johnny really couldn't turn around without something happening.

He sighed, passing out the drinks.

"What happened?"

"Well, Barnes popped up like he's tracking Daniel. Wasn't expecting *all* of us and was short one of his goons, so he didn't try anything but threatened to trash the shop again before we'd get back, said if we're all here there's no one to protect the bonsai," Bobby said with a sigh.

"He doesn't know where they are now, but if he did and even if he bypassed the keypad or broke in Mr. and Mrs. P wouldn't let him get too far," Dutch said.

"Daniel signed the paperwork," Jimmy said.

"He also threatened Jessica," Tommy added with a deep frown.

"Slimeball," Jessica said sourly.

"Do you want to learn some self-defense moves?" Dutch asked taking his smoothie from her.

"Maybe I should," she sighed.

"Well you've got one guy who knows taekwondo and six who know

karate, so take your pick," Bobby said with a grin.

Johnny walked over to Daniel stepping into the path he was wearing down into the dirt while Jessica moved into a practice stance with the guys coaxing her through practice moves, smoothies in hand.

"Hey," he said softly holding out the drink for him in one hand.

Daniel stopped startled and took the drink looking up at him.

"It's okay, remember the plan?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah," Daniel said. "I just, we live with Mr. Miyagi so we're not alone, but Jessica-"

"We'll update security at her place too," Johnny said. "have her check-in at night, it'll be fine. She can let her aunt know. And you can add her to your list of nightly calls like your mom."

"Just what I need to rack the phone bill up even worse than I already do," Daniel said with a frown, but his shoulders were relaxed.

Johnny laughed softly.

Mrs. LaRusso did rack up their phone bill, but it was expected.

It was better than not hearing from her.

"We'll do our best to keep her safe. And she will too," Johnny said motioning to where she was sparring with Bobby, moving to block his telegraphed slow moves. "It may be fun to add it to your routine. Run in the morning, spar with Jessica, go to the shop, and then on the weekends we'll go rock climbing."

"Who'd have thought not going to college would keep us so busy?"

"Life just seems to be made that way."

Daniel nodded trying his smoothie then looking up at Johnny.

"What's this? This doesn't taste healthy."

Johnny grinned.

"It's full of protein powder, but it's chocolate and peanut butter with a banana. You can torture yourself with healthy green smoothies tomorrow. How is it?"

"It's good. Wait what did you get?"

"Acai, want to try it?" Johnny asked holding his drink out to him.

Daniel took it and handed him his to try.

The haunted looked, the tension from running into Barnes again seemed to be fading.

Johnny wondered how Barnes had found him this time.

This area didn't seem like a Barnes haunt.

Did he just cruise around all day looking for Daniel?

He was glad Daniel hadn't been alone, that there hadn't been a fight.

Hopefully, now that Daniel had signed the paperwork he'd be left alone until the tournament.

He reached out and took Daniel's empty hand.

"Think you can do this every morning?"

"Yeah, I'm more awake now. I think it's possible. Just going to take a while to be able to keep up with Jessica and Dutch."

"I'm sure you'll find them running *with* you."

"You think? I'm so much slower than all of you."

"You'll catch up. Give yourself time. Jessica's been doing this since before she moved here, and Dutch has been doing taekwondo. It's unfair to yourself to compare. You'll see as you keep going, as you keep getting better."

"Think I'll catch up to you?" Daniel asked.

"Maybe, I'd be excited to see it," Johnny said warmly. "But I also don't mind running by your side. How's your shoulder doing?"

"Itchy," Daniel said sourly.

"Because it's healing. We've got something in the first aid kit at home for that. I'll put some on it when we get home."

"Thanks," Daniel said softly, kicking at the dirt.

Johnny glanced around then ducked down, kissing him.

"Always and anytime," he said when he pulled away.

Chapter End Notes

I want to stamp no bonsais were harmed in the creation of this fic. Even though they're fictional. So we are not digging up Mr. Miygai's bonsai from Okinawa and it's not getting ripped in half. We're not even going to meet Mike Barnes while rock climbing because how the heck did he find them there???? They were down a hole in the earth out in the middle of nowhere. It doesn't make any sense to me. So I've nixed it.

Grand Opening

Chapter Notes

> Due to some family stuff I will be taking a hiatus. The current plan is to be back in about a week.
>
> Messing with the timeline a little bit here too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Running was not Daniel's favorite thing. But going with Jessica and Dutch was surprisingly pleasant, they'd been doing it for a week.

It was getting easier.

The downfall however was that Dutch would also show up at the house to pick him up and would just come directly to the room to make sure he got up.

Scared the shit out of Daniel the first time. He woke up to his alarm then turned and there was Dutch, sitting at his desk. Scared him so badly he yelped and Johnny woke up, sitting up hair all messed up, looking around. When he saw Dutch dressed for a run and Johnny had just mumbled, "Have fun running," kissed Daniel's cheek and went back to bed.

It wouldn't be until later in the week, the security was supposed to get set up. He wondered if it would deter Dutch from his morning wake up. He doubted he'd be that lucky plus they were starting with the shop because the opening day was coming up fast. *Then* the house.

He'd wanted to sleep in five minutes halfway through the week and Dutch had pulled at his sleeve.

"LaRusso, time to run. Up we go Daniel. Go get ready."

Daniel had joked that Jessica was going to be his trainer, but he hadn't expected how much Dutch just wasn't going to let him wiggle out of it.

He became like a brick wall not letting Daniel turn around or change his mind, just kept turning him around and pointing forward.

Onward.

Johnny joked that Dutch was herding him, and it really felt like it. Like Daniel was some sheep and Dutch was a sheepdog not letting Daniel just mosey and enjoy smelling the flowers.

But, as Johnny had expected they didn't leave him behind as he'd feared. Running with him and chatting along the way.

He told Jessica about the death match in Okinawa.

She told them about all the mountains she had hiked and climbed, from Sugarloaf to Knobly. He thought she was joking about the names of these mountains.

"They're real!" she said laughing, adamant she was telling the truth.

"Sure they're real," Dutch said laughing as well. "Like the tooth fairy."

"We'll go to a library or somewhere with an atlas and I'll show you," she said.

It was an early grey morning, with a light mist. A little unusual, Daniel thought but he also wasn't up early in California that frequently to know for sure.

Jessica had been asking Dutch about his bees and was slowly getting a list of all of Dutch's pet bugs. A lot of beetles from the sound of it. Butterflies too.

Daniel wanted to go back to the conservatory and look around some more. But he had a feeling it'd be a while.

He spotted a water fountain and beelined to get water as the two of them bounced at his side, warning him not to slow down for too long.

"Hey!" a voice called and Daniel turned to look at an old damaged blue Ford pull up alongside the sidewalk.

"Oh hey," Daniel could not remember the guy's name.

He walked over, trying to remember the guy's name while he introduced Jessica and Dutch who came closer, curious.

"Terry Silver," the man said.

Daniel introduced them, Dutch and Jessica to Mr. Silver.

"안녕하세요," Dutch said with a slight nod to his head.

Daniel didn't have a clue what Dutch had said or why.

Mr. Silver glanced at Dutch before turning back to Daniel.

"You training for the Olympics or something?"

"No, uh, just some tournament," Daniel said.

It felt weird to say he was training for a tournament when he didn't think he really would compete. When he didn't want to. But that'd take too long to explain.

"The one you won last year? What's it called?"

"The All Valley."

He felt like he should've thrown in the *under 18*. That he didn't want to but was cornered.

"Right. Good, good for you. A champion *should* defend his title. John Kreese told me you had a lot of heart."

"Oh, yeah?"

Daniel liked the idea that John Kreese thought he had heart, but he doubted it.

He also noticed Dutch had stopped bouncing and was holding himself in that coiling position, just ever so subtly. Like the name of his old teacher had gotten his blood boiling. Daniel understood that.

"Listen, do you know how to do a front sweep?"

"Well, uh, not really."

Daniel wondered what he was talking about. Mr. Miyagi didn't really name the moves. Not the same way as Johnny knew them. They'd sat down and compared notes and Johnny knew the names to all the moves and Daniel knew them as wax on, wax off or like drum technique. He wondered which one was probably a front sweep.

"Learn, learn. Most of these tournament guys are a sucker for the front sweep. You can catch them *every time*."

"Really?"

That sounded too good to be true. He'd have to ask the guys. He'd have to ask Johnny. He knew all the moves.

"Ask your Mr. Miyagi. He'll show you."

Daniel was pretty sure if he asked Mr. Miyagi, Mr. Miyagi would show him how to sweep. Like with a broom. It was a nice idea, but he didn't teach that way.

Unless that was what a front sweep was.

"Yeah, well, I'm kind of training for this one myself."

"Oh, that's too bad. Look, I've got a good book on sweep techniques. I'll drop it off for you sometime, okay?"

Daniel really didn't want to learn from a book again, but Mr. Silver was trying to be helpful and he could use all the help he could get.

Plus he'd sounded like he was actually worried about Daniel.

Actually wanted him to win and to learn, that hearing Daniel was on his own for this one had him sympathetic and worried.

When Mr. Silver drove off Jessica turned to them.

"That was real nice of him to offer the book-" she stopped staring over Daniel's shoulder.

Daniel turned.

Dutch was watching the car drive off with a strange look on his face.

When the Ford turned the corner and disappeared out of sight he howled with laughter, scaring a man walking his dog nearby.

"What?" Daniel asked.

"John Kreese said you have *heart*? The guy wouldn't know a compliment if it slithered up his ass. Heart? *Kreese* thought *you* had heart. The absolute bull shit this man is shoveling."

"He said he came into town to help Kreese apologize," Daniel said. "Maybe Kreese had told him stuff he wouldn't tell other people."

Dutch was starting to bounce again, still laughing, ready to get moving.

Daniel sighed following him with Jessica back along their path.

"Yeah about the damn *all-valley* which he suddenly doesn't remember what it's called? I think he was just pissed because you forgot his name."

"He came all the way from Korea, he's bound to forget things."

Dutch continued to laugh. "Yeah, I doubt that's true either. The guy is made of lies and nothing of substance. If he's been living in Korea and studying under a Korean teacher he should've known what to say in response to 안녕하세요."

"What do you say in response to annyeonghaseyo?" Jessica said slowly repeating what Dutch had said.

"You repeat it back."

"What's it mean?" she asked.

"Peace be with you, it's the greeting. Polite form. I mean he could've said something else to me because I'm younger, but still it's basic shit he should know having come from Korea and having had a Korean teacher. And you said he said Kreese also studied from the same teacher? No fucking way. He never used any Korean. He always told us he learned in the army. Daniel, I'm telling you, that guy is lying through his damn teeth," Dutch said. "And about weird shit. Who lies about who taught them?"

Daniel frowned as they ran.

"What about the front sweep?"

"I mean yeah," Dutch said. "But man, it's kind of close to what Johnny did to you in the tournament. It's not like Barnes *isn't* going to know it. Really you should ask Johnny to teach you that, he'd be good at it. He read all those books and then practiced them. Unless that's on your *list of rewards*."

Daniel nearly tripped over his own feet glancing at Dutch who was laughing.

"What? What's on his list of rewards?" Jessica asked.

"It was what he was mumbling about the first time we went out for a run, mixed with enjoying the view," Dutch said.

"Well, that can be a good motivator. Oh, wait Johnny was saying he'd over heard part of it, didn't understand it, something about coming home to him?" Jessica said thoughtfully, trying to remember.

"I guess that's one way to put it," Dutch said with a laugh.

"I'm sorry okay," Daniel said.

"Hey man, you do you. We've been cockblocking you left and right haven't we? Hang in there," he said cackling.

"Not just you," Daniel said sourly, "This whole damn situation. There's always something."

"*Oh*!" Jessica said eyes wide. "I'm suddenly glad I chose to run with Johnny that first morning."

"Yeah count your blessings," Dutch said. "I delved into the inner workings of Daniel's mind, just a small portion of it and I am scarred for life. I was a little worried, but it seems to not be a problem if Johnny's not around. So we're lucky."

"So does your Mom know you and Johnny are dating?"

"Yeah," Daniel said.

"Want to know something funny?" Dutch asked with a big grin and Daniel's heart sank.

"Yes,"Jessica said.

"So Johnny's got a crush. We try and invite Daniel to hang out as much as possible right? They're...*hmm*...cuddly? Right? Cute. Johnny continues to chalk it up to just how Daniel is. Well Daniel tells his Mom and ex, right? And Johnny tells *his* Mom. Their moms become friends. Daniel's Mom fishes for info but Ms. Lawrence made a promise to Johnny to not interfere. So like there were all these chances of them dating earlier and finding out, but no one talked to one another, and guess who confessed first?" Dutch said with a big grin.

"Daniel?" Jessica said.

"You would *think,* right? He talks the most. You'd think he'd just spill right? Explode at some point for hiding his feelings for- what was it, Daniel? Almost six months?"

"Or *something*," Daniel mumbled.

"Nope, *Johnny* did. Daniel, tell her when our favorite idiot decided he had to tell you?"

"In the middle of a big dangerous storm," Daniel said.

"In Okinawa?" Jessica asked.

"Yes."

"Isn't that great? Put them together in room after room. Hell, I threw them together for 7 minutes in heaven. Nada. Throw danger at them and bam dating. Oh, and everyone's like ah yes, stamp of approval. *Except* for Johnny's ex-stepfather."

"What happened there?" Jessica asked eyes wide, totally enjoying the drama of Daniel's life.

"He belatedly said if he had to chose a guy for Johnny, *I* was the one he would've picked," Dutch said with a laugh."After five years of hating my guts, and every friend Johnny has."

"Daniel you live in a soap opera."

"Right?" Dutch said. "And everyone wants to make it even more of a soap opera. Like look at this Silver guy right? Says his teacher is from Korea. Can't even say hello in Korean. Says he came because Kreese fucked up the All Valley, can't remember the damn name of the tournament. Says he's here because my sensei died out of a broken heart because we left because he tried to fucking kill Johnny yet we haven't seen any obituaries or a grave or a damn urn with ashes in it. And then he says Kreese said Daniel has heart? Oh, he's trying so hard for something but I don't know what. But it's the next chapter of Daniel's dramatic life."

"I *swear* my life wasn't this dramatic in Newark," Daniel said.

"What'd you do make a wish with a genie on the ride over?" Dutch asked.

"Oh, or a wish on a star?" Jessica asked.

"Deal with a devil at the crossroads?"

"Cursed wishing well?"

"What did you ask for Daniel? *I want a grand adventure?* Man, you really gotta be careful what you wish for huh?"

"I did no such thing, I wanted to go home the whole way here," Daniel said.

"Still feel that way?" Dutch asked, playful tone suddenly softer.

"No, I like LA."

"Where's home for you now?" Jessica asked. "I like LA but home's still Columbus for me."

"I keep trying to make it *here*," Daniel said. "But then it feels like people and things keep trying to stop that."

"Time to put your foot down and kick their ass," Dutch said.

Dutch made it sound so easy. But he'd also seen Dutch fight. He'd been on the other side of it. He didn't back down, he didn't seem to get scared.

Daniel *was* scared. It bubbled up from time to time.

He'd fought someone to the death last time and got out of it by pure luck.

How'd he get out of this one? Because it seemed like Barnes wanted to kill him.

Why him? Why was it *always* him?

They continued to run until the cafe Jessica wanted to go to opened. A place to get juice and omelets near the park.

Daniel collapsed into the seat, grateful to sit. To stop moving for a second while the other two went over the menu.

He tried to enjoy the moment. Because he had done it. He'd gone for a run for a full week.

He had friends willing to get up early and go running with him, who didn't mind running slowly, even if it felt like they were running circles around him, keeping pace and keeping him moving forward.

Friends to talk with and to get breakfast with. He hadn't thought he'd get back to this.

This is what he thought his life in Newark would've been like, continued to be like if he'd stayed.

A dream he let go of when he moved to LA.

He just wanted the *reason* to not be there. The whole reason he was up early and the reason he was running.

Why couldn't it have been something simple like *hey we run in the morning all the time, why don't you join us?*

Why'd it have to be someone wanted to fight him, backed him into a corner, and now he had to run. Had to train.

Why couldn't it be normal?

The shop was almost ready. Mr. Miyagi was excited. He sang as he worked, hummed, had that sparkle in his eyes and that easy smile. Everything was worth it to have made him that happy.

They'd picked a Saturday for opening day and very very carefully transferred all the bonsai back to the shop with Dutch's help. They set up the shelves, the pots Jessica had made were done and it really was perfect.

Johnny and Daniel told Mr. Miyagi to flip the sign to open for the first time.

Daniel tried to not get his hopes up.

He was worried Barnes and his friends would show up.

He hoped signing the damn paperwork would stop him. Appease him long enough to leave him alone. Let them have this day. This space.

Mr. Miyagi was smiling as he flipped the sign, opening the door and bowing.

Ms. Lawrence stepped in, dressed like she was planning to attend a red carpet event and wanted to stop by to get a bonsai beforehand. Like this was an errand, like she was grabbing a nice bottle of wine.

Even though Daniel had a brunch scheduled with her for later in the month, something that had made him nervous when Johnny had held his hand over the receiver of the phone and held it out to him with a soft, "My mom wants to talk to you."

That had nearly given him a heart attack, even though she made it

sound easy and fun.

He was worried that this was a moment to judge him. That she was looking for dust, for things to criticize. But she was walking through the shop with Mr. Miyagi looking at the trees and asking him about them.

Johnny looked so at ease that Daniel tried to relax.

Dutch's hand came down on his shoulder.

"Dude you're fine. Ms. Lawrence likes you. Chill."

Easy for Dutch. He was almost always chill.

There was so much in Daniel's life to *not* be chill about. But he took a deep breath and tried to find that internal balance Mr. Miyagi always talked about.

She ended up buying three and Daniel didn't know how to feel about that.

They'd made money. Which was great. A sale. And she refused discounts. But it was also like if his mom had come to his lemonade stand and was his *only* customer.

She looked pleased about it. And Johnny carried them out to her car looking happy as well.

Daniel felt relieved as he closed the cash register.

He'd mark it as a win. Even if no one else came for the day, they'd still had a sale.

Even if it might've been a pity sale.

"She dressed up," Dutch said amused when Johnny came back in after his mother left.

"Yeah, she was pretty excited. Circled opening day on her calendar and already knew where she wants to put them. She's trying to fill the house with as many plants as possible. I had to tell her she couldn't buy them all."

Dutch laughed. "I can't wait to see her place when she has her housewarming party."

"Me too. She's been sketching it out, it's kind of cool."

The door bell rang and Daniel who had resigned himself to one sale and the only other guests being Jessica or the guys, hopped up from his stool at the checkout.

Actual customers.

He watched as Mr. Miyagi spoke with them, as Johnny talked to them, as Dutch helped carry things for them.

He recognized some of them, their neighbors, people who Johnny had handed the flyers out to.

People he didn't know but who seemed to see Johnny and Dutch and who talked to them both warmly. He heard them talk about a gardening shop.

Daniel was surprised at how busy it got.

He hadn't expected that.

He hadn't expected to be so busy that he didn't even see that the guys had arrived until Tommy's aunt was snapping photos for a local magazine, wanting to interview Mr. Miyagi about bonsai and the shop for a spotlight.

So busy that he didn't realize it was lunch time until Jessica popped up at his side with a bag of take out and gave his arm a gentle squeeze.

"Looks like it's a hit," she said with a soft smile.

"Yeah," Daniel said, taking it all in.

There was always a chance they wouldn't keep this momentum up. But they wouldn't be in the *red*.

They'd be able to keep paying rent.

They'd be able to keep stock and designing stock.

They could pay Johnny.

He felt hopeful. It'd been so hard to feel hopeful. And everyone looked happy.

Busy and happy.

"Congratulations," Jessica said warmly.

"Thank you," Daniel said smiling back.

When the evening came to an end and they locked up, Daniel sunk down to the floor with a sigh.

Johnny was stretching, which was distracting Daniel from what Jessica was talking about.

Bobby had gotten dinner, some take out from a nice restaurant he liked and they sat together in a circle, leaving room for Johnny who walked into the back.

"Congratulations on your first day of your dream shop Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said when he came back, opening a bottle and pouring some into a glass that he handed to Mr. Miyagi.

"What's this?"

"Grand opening gift," Johnny said. "Mom helped me pick it out. It's supposed to be a champagne-style sake."

"Thank you Johnny-san. Please thank mother too," Mr. Miyagi said holding out his glass in a kanpai to their sodas in plastic cups.

Daniel was surprised they weren't drinking as Johnny sunk down next to him, carefully setting the bottle down for Mr. Miyagi to look at.

"Of course Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said taking the bowl of food Bobby was handing him.

"You gonna do teach a bonsai class, Mr. Miyagi?" Tommy asked.

"Or like a workshop?" Jimmy added.

"On bonsai?" Mr. Miyagi asked.

"Yeah, you could offer lessons and classes, people like that kind of thing. And they pay for it," Bobby said.

"Miyagi think about it."

Daniel liked that idea. People coming to learn about bonsai from Mr. Miyagi. A shop with a section for lessons. Learning how to care for tiny trees. It sounded like fun.

Johnny leaned over, shoulder gently brushing Daniel's and he looked over as the guys talked about all the different lessons, as Jessica talked about the community classes the pottery shop did.

"How do you feel?" Johnny asked softly.

"Relieved," Daniel said.

"You did good. This is very cool Daniel."

Daniel felt his heart pounding in his chest. He set his hand on the floor between them, he couldn't do what he wanted, well he could, but the guys wouldn't let him live it down, so instead he laced his fingers through Johnny's on the floor between them. He smiled, they had done it. Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees was up and running and a hit and Mr. Miyagi was living his dreams. It felt so good and he was grateful for the friends around him, there to help celebrate his wins and to help him through his losses.

Chapter End Notes

> The names of places you can apparently rock climb are hilarious According to the Mountain project there are several places to rock climb in Ohio, including some locations called Slippery When Wet, Scrub-a-Dub-Dub, and Slappy McCracken. The area around Ohio heads into the Blue Mountains which then joins the Appalachian mountains. All mountains mentioned are technically mountains, but whether they're open to the public for hiking and/or rock climbing or were in the '80s is a different matter. Sugarloaf I think was privately owned and while you can probably hike all the mountains I mentioned, rock climbing is a different matter. On some websites it says you can rock climb at Sugarloaf but they don't list it as something to do on their website but you can hike.
>
> Champagne sake is actually calledSparkling sake or sparkling nihonshu

Post-run nap

Every morning didn't go the same way.

Dutch came back with Daniel several mornings and would bring Jessica so Johnny stopped trying to go back to sleep. He'd read a little and then getting up and would make breakfast.

Sometimes Mr. Miyagi would still be around and they'd eat together. Other mornings it was just him.

He'd do kata in the garden, taking his bonsai out with him, like he had an audience of one, or a friend practicing with him, just a million times slower, practicing what Mr. Miyagi and Daniel had taught him.

Then his mother learned he was up early every morning and started to come by to get him for breakfast.

He tried to tell her he was waiting for Daniel to come home and he didn't mind waiting for him but she said he shouldn't spend his whole life waiting on a boy. Even if that boy was Daniel. His time was precious and he needed to use it properly. Let Daniel wait from time to time.

Johnny didn't know how to explain to her that he found it relaxing. It wasn't like he was standing in front of a mirror messing with his hair every five minutes or trying to look nice. He was still doing stuff. Taking the time while he waited to do things he needed to do or wanted to do, when he had time to himself. Like installing a grate in the chimney so he could stop checking it every time he walked by.

But he did tell her about the All-Valley and the stuff happening with Daniel and she listened with a frown.

"Cobra Kai is competing?"

"Apparently," Johnny said.

"They shouldn't be. Or Kreese shouldn't be. I've him banned."

"Someone else then. Oh, also some company called Dynatox is sponsoring it and changed the rules."

"Dynatox huh?" she asked scribbling the name down on a napkin.

They were at an old-fashioned diner and she had gotten them both big breakfast platters with pancakes, eggs, bacon, fruit, and toast.

It was too much food but she liked to take the leftovers home.

Sid always told her it looked bad to take leftovers home, wouldn't let her. She was loving doing everything he'd told her she shouldn't or couldn't.

She even would take Johnny's leftovers home. She'd eat them throughout the rest of the day.

Her home was almost done, almost ready for her party. She was getting excited about it. To show everyone around, to celebrate being single again. To have her own place.

She opened her wallet and pulled out a wad of cash and set it in front of Johnny.

"Mom, I'm fine," Johnny said.

She'd already been putting money in his account. He remembered walking into the bank to take out cash and having to figure out where all the money had come from. A stipend, an allowance, and she wouldn't *stop* giving him money.

He didn't know what to do with it. He tried to pay rent to Mr. Miyagi and he refused. Told him to clean the gutters instead. In a Miyagi way. Just a quiet note that *hmmm gutters full.*

He no longer felt like he needed an emergency fund. He didn't plan to go anywhere. Just quietly work with Daniel at Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees. Now he didn't even need to be paid.

He could be dorky and say he wanted to be paid in kisses from Daniel or something else silly. It seemed too silly to tell him. But he kind of wanted to.

His mother wouldn't hear of it though. Wanted him to get paid, even if it wasn't much. She was used to not being paid for her work, not enough, and she wasn't happy with the amount of work he was doing for free. Even though he told her he liked doing it. Even if he told her she was giving him too much of an allowance for an 18-year-old boy with little to no expenses. He had to remind her the Avanti wasn't a black hole for gas. That he was volunteering most of the work he was doing. And volunteering was good.

But she wasn't going to stop. She'd stubbornly told him that she didn't get to spoil him, so she was now. Plus she told him he was probably the only kid on the planet complaining that his parent was giving him money.

He doubted that. He knew she worried. Knew she'd been upset when he told her about the emergency fund, about being in Okinawa with no money. Getting hurt in Okinawa and relying on Mr. Miyagi and Yukie to take care of him.

She was overcompensating.

He wanted to explain that if he didn't need to get paid for working for Daniel then they could keep the lights on at the shop longer.

He knew it probably wasn't a good idea long-term. Daniel wasn't the type to let Johnny continue to work for free for long.

But Johnny also wanted to help keep Mr. Miyagi's dream going, to help it reach that point of self-sufficiency and if not getting paid or just collecting IOUs could get them there he'd do it.

"Do you know how to do a front sweep?" Daniel asked after one of his runs.

"Yeah," Johnny said looking up from his book.

"Can you show me?" Daniel asked.

He was sweaty and tired-looking, hair plastered to his forehead.

"Sure," Johnny said setting aside his book and standing.

He walked to Daniel and hooked his leg behind his, tapping at it.

"If I put enough weight and motion here you'd fall."

"Do it," Daniel said.

Johnny nodded, making sure there was nothing he could hurt himself on if he fell.

He looked at Daniel, making sure he was ready, and then knocked his foot against the back of Daniel's leg, sweeping it out from under him.

He reached out and grabbed Daniel before he completely fell.

"Do you want to try?" Johnny asked looking down at him. If sweeping hadn't been the awful thing Kreese demanded Johnny do in the tournament he'd do it more often. Just to catch Daniel in his arms. But it was tainted by the tournament.

Daniel had a thoughtful look on his face.

"Yeah," he said after a moment, pushing himself up and out of Johnny's arms.

He was too gentle the first time but got Johnny the second time.

Johnny got back up quickly and Daniel did it again.

The third time Johnny pulled Daniel down with him, on top of him.

"Is this how you counter it?" Daniel asked amused looking down at him.

"In a tournament? No. Bad idea," Johnny said. "You don't want those guys this close, they can steal a point."

"Is sweeping a good way to get points? Think it'd work against Barnes?" Daniel asked.

"Maybe not perfectly, but it could give you a moment, a breather to take a point and then get away from him," Johnny said thoughtfully.

Daniel pushed himself up but stopped about halfway up, chewing on his bottom lip then looking back down at Johnny and dipping down to kiss him.

"*That* is definitely a bad idea for a tournament," Johnny said. "You will not get a point."

"Really?" Daniel teased.

"Nope, can't hit the face."

"That's a hit?"

"I think it's the only thing it could be construed as based off the rule book," Johnny said.

"A kiss is *not* a hit," Daniel said.

"It's contact isn't it?" Johnny said propping himself up with a grin.

"Semantics," Daniel said rolling his eyes. "I think it doesn't count."

"Well, you'll just have to try and change my mind."

Daniel didn't need more than one quick invitation before he was kissing him again, pushing him back down into the grass.

Johnny was kind of surprised he still had energy.

The first morning he'd stayed home while Daniel was out running he'd tried to go back to sleep but it was impossible to sleep in after Daniel left.

He tried.

He knew Daniel hoped he'd just go back to sleep.

But without that weight, that warmth he just couldn't sleep any longer.

So he sat in bed and read.

He worked on his bonsai, talking quietly to it about how it was so damn early that maybe he *should* go running with Daniel every morning.

Or maybe he could go fishing with Mr. Miyagi.

What did people who got up so early normally do? A run on the beach?

He used to go for a run on the beach and then to a gym, one that was practically free near the beach so he could do Kreese's workout regimen without Sid's money.

It would depend on what Daniel actually really wanted. It had sounded like Daniel had wanted to come home and have sex, but with the way Daniel had practically collapsed after the last run, Johnny didn't think that would actually happen.

But maybe he'd want to go back to sleep, or cuddle, or talk. Or who knew, maybe that runners high would lead to something else.

Johnny went back to reading.

He'd finished all the books the guys were supposed to read for the semester and the librarian, impressed had handed him a thick book, *The Count of Monte Cristo,* telling him to read it next.

He was thinking he'd have to recommend it to Tommy. It had an air of mystery to it he thought Tommy would like.

He wondered if Daniel would like it, but he was worried that the length of it would scare Daniel off. But he was enjoying it.

The door opened and Daniel was wearing his robe, he must've come home and gone straight into the shower.

Johnny had meant to pretend to be asleep, to try again, because that had been part of Daniel's mumblings, waking Johnny up. But then he'd gotten lost in the fucked up life of Edmond Dantès and the perfect storm of evil scheming men that sent him to the chateau d'if.

"Why am I not surprised?" Daniel asked with an amused look sitting down next to him. "Did you go back to sleep after I left?"

"I couldn't, I meant to but," Johnny held up the heavy book.

"That good huh?" Daniel asked rolling onto his side, leaning against Johnny's shoulder.

Johnny wanted to say yes. Would happily start over and read it to Daniel, introduce him to Edmond the sailor who was arrested on his wedding day because of a conspiracy, a group of people who were pissed at him for being successful and getting the girl.

Johnny stuck a bookmark into the book and set it aside.

"It's good. How was your run?"

Daniel's arm came around his chest, curling up against him.

"I hate it," he said with a frown.

"That bad huh?"

"But," Daniel said with a sigh. "They're good company and they keep me going. They are brutally determined not to let me slow down or stop."

"That's good right?"

"Yeah," Daniel said but without the feeling behind it, like it was but he didn't like it.

Johnny shifted down so they were face to face, rolling on his side towards Daniel.

"I'm proud of you."

Daniel looked at him, a little surprised.

Johnny gently put his hand on Daniel's cheek.

"You're getting up early and doing something you don't want to. It's not easy. I hated going for 5 am runs. But it's better than a 1 pm run. You're doing all of this stuff with a goal in mind. You're showing up, it's fine if you complain about it or hate it. But you're still doing it."

Johnny was pretty sure Daniel wasn't wearing anything under the robe and he wanted to answer that question, it was open at his shoulders and he could see the expanse of skin there, but he wanted to know for sure.

He wanted to reward Daniel for his hard work. It might not have been exactly what Daniel had in mind when he mumbled about coming home to Johnny but he thought it could be pleasant, and he wanted to try.

"Is Mr. Miyagi's truck here?" Johnny asked.

"No, he's gone to the shop already."

"Did Dutch drop you off or is he also around somewhere?"

"He had taekwondo, he left," Daniel said.

Johnny nodded leaning forward to kiss Daniel, hands going to the tie around Daniel's waist but Daniel had shut his eyes, his breathing was slow and steady, asleep.

So fast that Johnny had been stunned.

Exhausted from running.

He let his hands drop and just picked up his book again, reading with Daniel curled up next to him, sleeping softly, damp hair on Johnny's arm, bound to fall asleep before Daniel woke up again.

Now though it seemed like he had more energy with the way his hands were running up along Johnny's chest. Awake more than he had been the last couple of times he'd come home and taken a nap, finding wherever Johnny was and climbing onto his lap making Johnny think things were going in a different direction before Daniel fell asleep. It'd happened six times so far, not that Johnny was keeping track.

"Are you going to fall asleep?" Johnny asked when Daniel pulled away from his lips to look down at Johnny.

"Of course not," Daniel said.

"You like your after-run naps," Johnny said.

Daniel was tugging up Johnny's shirt and he felt the tickle of grass against his skin.

"I think I'm finally building up some stamina," Daniel said.

He looked proud of himself, confident. But still tired.

Johnny didn't get his hopes up. He'd been on this ride before, it was a slow carousel that before it came to an end Johnny usually ended up with Daniel asleep and Johnny having to carry him off to bed any hopes of an orgasm or anything close thrown out the window.

He started to push himself up a little but Daniel pushed down on his shoulder.

A gentle request to stay.

Johnny stayed, watching Daniel sitting on top of him, looking golden in the early morning light.

There were a lot of things Daniel never had control of in his life that Johnny knew.

It was like he was playing an awful game of shells and every time he made a choice life switched out the prize. Gave him a rock or nothing instead of money or a chocolate like he'd expected.

He didn't get to stay in Newark.

He didn't get to join the soccer team or swim in the pool he'd been promised.

He didn't get to spend his summer in LA with Ali, heck he hadn't gotten to spend prom with Ali either, he hadn't been able to talk Kumiko into coming home with them, he hadn't gotten to help Mr. Miyagi spend more time with his father, he didn't get to come home and see his mother or go back to the apartment and live there with her again.

He was forced into fight after fight without a choice.

Buffered around and it wasn't fair.

Daniel complained about it. But he also faced it. Dug around him to get his bearings before facing it.

He'd search other spots of his life for some semblance of control, his own way of balancing it out.

Sometimes he just wanted Johnny to be there. To lean against him, a safe steady shore to weather out the other storms.

Sometimes if Johnny thought of where they started he felt dizzy. Overwhelmed by the way Daniel looked at him, reached out for him, trusted him.

He knew from the look on Daniel's face he wasn't going to sleep.

No before work nap this time.

His heart pounded in his ears, trying to swallow his heart back down, to force it to calm down.

"You do know, you were the hottest person in our school right?" Daniel asked, fingers running along his skin, like he's trying to memorize it, every feeling of Johnny beneath his fingers.

One thing Johnny had learned was that Daniel's mouth was always busy, especially now that they were on the same page.

Those quiet lust-filled looks didn't last too long before Daniel just closed in whatever distance there was and would start whispering in Johnny's ear and it was overwhelming. Hand on his arm, or shoulder.

Whatever dam had been keeping it all in his head had broken or overflowed and the number of compliments he got meant if someone asked Johnny what Daniel liked about him he'd have a very weird list to share if he felt like sharing it. Johnny didn't think he'd ever be able

to repeat it out loud.

Daniel liked his hair, the way the sun hit it, how soft it felt. That one was tame, something he sometimes whispered in their room when he played with Johnny's hair before bed or when he woke up.

He liked his muscles which Johnny had already guessed, already knew, but the way he talked about it was like a starving man being given his favorite meal.

Daniel liked his eyes, his hands, his legs, the list kept going depending on the day and his mood.

He liked this outfit or that outfit, specifically because of the way it showed off a muscle or his eyes or something else, but he liked it better if it was off.

He was talking about his ears, which was a new one.

Daniel was talking about how pretty they were when they were red and Johnny was struggling because Daniel was biting his earlobe, his breath tickled and his hands were on him, between them and it was hard to figure out how to focus, what to focus on.

He was always trying something new. Always had something he wanted to give a try. Some never-ending list. Like he had a copy of *kama sutra* somewhere with a goal to try every possible choice, even though Johnny knew they weren't anywhere near that yet. Working their way there though Daniel kept small bottles in his pockets now, like he was ready for that, with travel size lotions or vaseline or oil, whatever that wasn't for his hands. Or was only for one hand. They still got used, just not how Johnny expected, not yet.

Johnny didn't know how to respond to what Daniel always talked about, told him, the never-ending cascade of warm compliments, the way he lamented that Johnny wasn't in a dojo that wore gi's because it'd be fun to take it off, like that was a normal regret someone would have.

But while Johnny didn't have the same courage to just compliment someone until they turned into a pile of goo which is what Johnny felt like, he kept trying to figure out a way to convey how he felt back. He didn't know where to start.

Like he was pretty sure if Daniel had talked his ear off in the first place, anywhere even close to this, he wouldn't have been able to lift a

fist to have fought Daniel for the life of him.

He would've curled up in a ball covering his blushing face with his arms.

An instant knockout, point LaRusso.

Which would've been a very different night on the beach that first time.

Kreese wouldn't have been able to give him a good counter, because Johnny didn't think there was one for horny Italian guy from Newark with a dirty mouth that knew what he was doing or at least had the confidence to follow through until Johnny was boneless and towing a line of embarrassed and turned on like a trapeze artist.

He wanted to think of a way to reciprocate it, other than rolling his hips, moving against Daniel, other than trying to touch Daniel whenever he could, trying desperately to focus when everything out of Daniel's mouth threatened to destroy it.

Johnny never would've won a single fight if he'd ever met this version of Daniel's dirty talk. Or the fact that he didn't seem to care where they were half the time. Like the garden.

Johnny would've moved them, to their room, but Daniel's one-track mind, once it got settled, didn't usually seem interested in moving.

Though to be fair, Johnny had opened that door at the drive-in, but he'd tried to give them as much privacy as possible.

The garden was barely private. And with the number of people who just showed up, it was almost less private than the shop. And even there Daniel would sometimes come up and whisper something in his ear. Like if he had something to say he couldn't keep it to himself.

It was kind of a relief that the shop had been busy since they opened.

That Mr. Miyagi was around, that Daniel kept professional appearances because he was pretty sure if there was a lull or if Mr. Miyagi left and it was just the two of them Daniel would not be able to keep his hands to himself.

And the problem was that Johnny wouldn't mind.

The fact Daniel wanted him, even if he hadn't said a word, even if he

didn't say it all the time, was addicting.

And it made him wish he'd gone to the beach earlier. That he hadn't thought about what he was going to tell Ali and practiced it in front of a mirror all afternoon, and practicing it quietly in front of Bobby, pacing in his room until he didn't sound like the nervous wreck he'd felt, in the hopes that she'd tell him something, anything about why.

That he'd just gone early, then maybe he'd have met Daniel first, maybe he would've been chiller about the whole thing, maybe he'd have played soccer with Daniel.

He wanted to hope for better what-ifs, more time together from the start, a change in timeline like he could go back and fix things, so that instead of doing this in Miyagi's garden they could've been doing this earlier.

Though there was a chance Johnny wouldn't have been able to focus long enough to graduate.

Every study date would've devolved, he wouldn't have escaped the clutches of Cobra Kai.

He might not have escaped Sid either.

He hated the "everything happens for a reason" nonsense but it was apt.

The path he'd taken had been long and winding, had beaten the shit out of him, cut up his feet so that whenever he looked back it was just a nightmare of his own bloody footprints and darkness. It was such a stark contrast from now that he wouldn't trade it. He'd rewalk through that awful path if it led him here, with Daniel rubbing against him and moaning loud enough Johnny was glad Miyagi lived in the middle of nowhere.

That they didn't have neighbors.

Johnny didn't know what they'd do if they got an apartment.

The number of noise complaints they'd get would probably get them kicked out.

All those dreams of soft mornings drinking coffee from their favorite mugs and making eggs and toast, standing in a kitchen somewhere downtown waking up slowly in the safety of their apartment. Safe

from people like Sid, or Kreese, or Mike Barnes and his friends might end abruptly if they couldn't figure out a way to quiet down in the right spaces.

That or Johnny was going to have to learn how to do soundproofing. Soundproof their entire apartment. Anywhere they lived. Because he never wanted to quiet Daniel, let him talk all day long, all night long, be as loud as he wanted, then they could play their music louder when they danced. *However*, they danced.

He'd find his own ways to show Daniel how much he loved him.

He'd work his way to words.

Ways to tell him that the way Daniel looked at him made his heart flutter, that he sought him out in a crowded room because he liked to see him having fun, liked to see the way he smiled when talking to people, talking with his hands.

He liked watching him cook, the way he danced around the kitchen, knowing how to do everything. The way sometimes he got show-offy with a knife, the way he could flip an omelet or a pancake with his wrist in the pan, no tools needed.

The way he leaned against the wall and curled the phone cord between his fingers while he talked to his mom.

The way he looked golden in the morning, the way his mouth tasted it when they kissed, his eyelashes while he was sleeping, the way he looked in those shorts he sometimes wore that seemed outrageously short, or that jersey that rose scandalously when he stretched.

The robe he wore when he got out of the shower after his runs, the way he talked about the bonsai, about his plans, his dreams, about anything, and everything, the way he looked so peaceful while doing kata, the way he looked when he drove his yellow Ford, when he drove Johnny somewhere like it was a treat, or even when he got into the Avanti.

The way he got annoyed when the guys showed up and slept on their floor, but then settled in and talked with them, enjoyed their company as much as they enjoyed his.

How nervous he looked setting a new dish he'd tried to make in front of Johnny, how expectant and how proud a simple nod and telling Daniel it was delicious made him. How he beamed. H

ow competitive he got over the simplest things and Johnny couldn't help but meet him, every time.

How fun it was to rile him up because it usually brought Daniel into his arms.

How he looked, how he sounded when he was close, fingers digging into Johnny's skin like he wanted to leave his fingerprints behind, to try and steady himself.

How the words out of his mouth somehow managed to get worse, something Johnny never thought was possible.

How Daniel always pulled Johnny along, over that edge like it was easy.

Maybe he was too easy. Which was an embarrassing realization.

Whatever Daniel wanted to do or try Johnny was down, as long as it was Daniel.

And he'd figure out how to tell him, one day.

Johnny had had breakfast with his mother again and it'd turned into brunch. After talking to him about plans she'd been working on for the house she drove him back to Mr. Miyagi's. He was getting the updates slowly. She'd hired an interior designer she was working with who'd painted and wallpapered, redone the carpets, and made sure her home was getting the most natural sunlight a house could without turning it into an oven during cloudless LA days.

He hopped out of her car and into the dirt of the lot.

It was sunny and warm out and there were new paths in the dirt.

Unfamiliar cars had come into the drive.

He walked quickly to her side, kissed her on the cheek, told her thank you and ran to the gate to the garden.

The guys always parked the same way, always stuck around and it was a weekday.

This was as if someone had peeled out in a hurry.

There was no blood that he could tell.

He spotted Daniel in the backyard in his work out clothes near the punching bag they'd set up.

He was sitting and reading some old book.

"What's that?" Johnny asked sinking down next to him.

He had some dirt on his shirt next to his neck and Johnny brushed it off.

Daniel looked up at him and showed him the book.

It was on karate.

Old.

Johnny shifted, pulling Daniel back into his arms, so he could read it over Daniel's shoulder.

Daniel settled against him.

It wasn't good.

It was dry.

It was like one of those books you find in a garage sale and you think *oh hey I like karate* only to find it's being sold for a *reason*.

A book where the writer didn't know what they were talking about.

The math textbook they had in school was more interesting then this thing.

"Daniel," Johnny whispered softly in his ear. "I can get you better books on karate. If you want to read about it."

Daniel blinked, pulling his gaze from the book.

"Are there better books on karate?" he asked like he doubted it was a possibility.

"Yeah, this is....uh...bad," Johnny said gently tapping the page of a badly inked person in a pose. "Where'd you even get it?"

"Just someone trying to help," Daniel said leaning back to look at him.

"I figure I can get all the help I can get."

Johnny didn't know how to tell Daniel that whoever gave him this book probably actively hated him.

It was the most passive-aggressive gift he'd seen in awhile.

It was like when you got someone a book on how to get their shit together when they thought they were doing fine.

It would've only been worse if it'd been like a karate for babies book.

"How about we go to the library?" Johnny asked gently kissing Daniel's neck.

"You say that like you're offering to take me dancing or somewhere to have sex," Daniel said with a breathy laugh.

"I *like* the library," Johnny said mock hurt, mock offense.

He hadn't really taken the guys with him to the library.

Any of the libraries in his collection.

But he couldn't just stand by and let Daniel read some awful book that was like trying to sift through sand for water.

It'd cause damage rather than teach him anything.

And he kind of liked the idea of taking Daniel to the library, holding his hand and leading him through the stacks, knowing his way around.

Showing off that he knew how to find things quickly, and knew the good ones.

Daniel was studying him for a split second before he grinned.

"Is this like a big deal?" Daniel asked.

He looked excited. Twisting around to look at Johnny.

"I know you like books and reading and whatnot, heck the book you've been reading is massive and you're still pretty into it. But is this like, oh I don't know, like if you take a girl shopping and you follow her around while she looks at shoes and she's just so fucking happy?"

"It's not like shoes," Johnny said releasing his arms from around Daniel's waist and leaning back.

"Ugh you know what I mean," Daniel said.

"No, I'm afraid I don't," Johnny said, head tilted.

He didn't.

He liked books yeah, but it wasn't the same as someone who liked shoes.

Libraries were free.

A no fight zone.

Safe.

He'd seen plenty of girls get into fights over clothes during a sale.

"You've got like what five library cards in your wallet, which one would we even go to?"

Johnny already knew which one.

The one that had stained glass ceilings and alcoves you could disappear into.

They had the best collection on martial arts and he hadn't been in in awhile.

Plus it was close.

No Strings Attached

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The libraries were somewhere that Daniel had wanted to see ever since realizing that was all that was the only thing in Johnny's wallet in Okinawa.

He wanted to know what kind of guy collected library cards like some people collected credit cards or baseball cards. Why *his* guy thought it was special.

He wanted to see what the appeal was.

He wanted to see it through Johnny's eyes.

Not just the library they went to for his birthday or the one in New York.

He wanted to see Johnny's libraries, the ones he loved so much he took their cards with him overseas.

Plus he was wondering if it could be an aphrodisiac. Like if they did well enough at Little Trees if Daniel took Johnny to a bookstore and told him to get whatever books he wanted if he'd get laid.

Not that Johnny really needed an aphrodisiac but Daniel wanted to collect all the things Johnny liked, wanted to know what got him going because so far Daniel thought he was still guessing.

To be fair having mornings filled with running had been exhausting, but Daniel knew what *he* wanted. He'd been enjoying what they were doing up till this point but he wanted something he didn't know if he could have.

Okay, there were a few things he wanted that he didn't know if he could have. But he was working up the courage to ask for one of them. Steps. Slow easy steps forward.

The problem was he'd have to keep his hands to himself and he didn't know if he could.

He was worried about it, worried they'd slide backward.

But the thought of Johnny looking up at him with those blue eyes, on his knees kept popping into Daniel's head, kept stirring his blood. He knew he'd want to put his hands in Johnny's hair, but he was scared he'd choke him.

It'd be different of course, he wouldn't put his hands around Johnny's neck, but he was worried that even though he knew he wouldn't last long that one wrong mindless move might wake up those very carefully laid to rest fight or flight responses.

It was why Daniel was mostly trying to control the flow of their encounters to rubbing against one another or hand jobs.

Because he feared hurting Johnny in any way close to some of the worst people who'd been in Johnny's life. He refused to be that person. To fall even remotely on the same radar, to set off those responses even by accident.

Johnny had parked at the library and was holding his hand out to him, motioning for him to follow.

Daniel took his hand, always surprised at how comfortable Johnny was at holding his hand almost anywhere and everywhere. Like he wasn't scared of anyone.

Johnny led him through large hallways that were polished and echo-y and up a set of spiral staircases into a large room with stained glass and through the stacks, like he knew his way around as easily as he knew his way around LA. He looked so at ease.

He stopped and let go of Daniel's hands looking through the shelves and grabbing books.

"This one is strategy," Johnny whispered placing one into Daniel's hands. "This one's offense, this one's defense, do you want history? No, probably not useful right now."

A book went back onto the shelf.

"This one has the sweeping you were asking about. Are five books too many?"

Daniel realized it wasn't a hypothetical question and looked at Johnny whose hand was hovering over the shelves, over another book, and Daniel smiled.

He was always so fucking beautiful. But the light of the library suited him in a weird way.

"This is enough," he said softly, holding the stack of books to his chest and holding out his other hand.

Johnny took it, leading Daniel through the halls to the checkout.

There was a librarian who looked kind of bored for the middle of the week mid-afternoon, but she perked up seeing Johnny, eyes glancing down to the held hands and then the smile turned to Daniel.

"Studying karate again?" she asked, eyes flicking back to Johnny.

"Daniel is," Johnny said with a soft smile.

She nodded.

"Johnny's read through that section at least fifteen times. Every book in the section, so he knows better than I do which ones are the best."

She took the books from Daniel going through and checking them out.

"He knew which ones to grab automatically. I think I'm lucky to leave with *only* five," Daniel said.

She smiled.

"He regularly maxes out how much he's allowed to check out. Though I heard, you're currently focusing on *The Count of Monte Cristo*. How's that going?"

Johnny looked a little startled.

"How did you-?"

"Well, we learned you've been sneaky and have multiple library cards during your mother's divorce proceedings. It was kind of nice to meet other librarians and talk about stuff, so now we meet a couple of times a month to compare notes and ideas. You come up sometimes. We were curious why you went to so many libraries so we compared what you checked out normally. That's how I learned we have the best martial arts collection," she said proudly.

Johnny looked embarrassed and shifted uneasily.

"Yeah, it's good."

She nodded, smiling warmly and taking his card. "Now I get to tell them *because* we have the better martial arts collection I got to meet Daniel. They will be very jealous. Daniel, you've got two weeks but you can renew them."

"Thank you," Daniel said taking the collection of books, shifting them back to one arm so he could hold Johnny's hand again.

He kind of liked that.

Liked that some group of librarians was going to meet up in a week or two to talk about what children's programs were working and what was bothering them and this librarian would tell them she had a sighting of Johnny's boyfriend and looked absolutely delighted about it.

He liked that Johnny's community seemed so excited to see him, so excited to see them.

Johnny was right.

The books he'd gotten Daniel from the library were a million times better than what Mr. Silver had given him.

He felt bad because maybe Mr. Silver just didn't realize.

Maybe he'd been out of the country too long to know that books had gotten better.

Maybe when he'd last been in the states this was all they'd had about karate.

But what he was reading was better. Plus if he got bored with one he could swap to the other ones. Read strategy, tournament styles, offense and defense, and basics.

Things he knew but hadn't ever had names for.

He read in the evenings after work, Johnny on his side of the bed reading, and Daniel felt kind of old.

Like this was going to be them in 50 years or so, but with reading glasses on their noses.

It felt dorky.

But Johnny looked so peaceful and content.

Running was also getting easier, his days were better.

He'd come home in the morning and shower after the run and go to their room to change.

Sometimes Johnny was still reading, sometimes he was in the garden doing kata, sometimes he was out having breakfast with his mom.

But it was nice.

One morning while Johnny was in their room reading Daniel decided to just ask, to just tell Johnny because it's what he wanted and it was becoming a persistent dream. Haunting him. His godfathers had always stressed talking about things, communication, and he knew they'd tell him to talk to Johnny.

He sunk down on the bed next to Johnny kissing the side of his neck.

Johnny put a bookmark in his book and turned to Daniel, moving so that he caught Daniel's lips with his own, away from his neck.

Even *that*, if Daniel thought too much about it made his heart hurt so badly.

Johnny trusted him to be near his neck, something he hadn't trusted anyone with for months, not even his mother.

And now Daniel could kiss him there and bite there and maybe Daniel didn't need a blow job. He could survive his entire life without one. They'd do other things, keep doing other things.

Johnny's hand was on his thigh, running his thumb in circles on his skin. Warm and soft from being in bed while Daniel had been out running.

Johnny's other hand went to the tie of the robe Daniel was wearing and it hesitated just the briefest of second before pulling it loose.

Hmmm, maybe he should just see where Johnny would go with this, because Daniel was curious. Curious what Johnny would do. He was pushing the robe from his shoulder, kissing the skin as it was exposed. So damn gentle.

"Do you need a nap?" Johnny asked pausing, hand warm on Daniel's hip.

Daniel was so focused on what Johnny was doing that it took him a moment to register what Johnny had asked.

"No, of course not."

"You sure?"

"You seriously think I can just pass out in this state?"

Johnny laughed softly. "Just checking. Last time I tried this you passed out."

Daniel blinked at him, he had taken naps the first couple of days after starting his running. Maybe the first week.

He would take a shower and curl up next to Johnny and fall asleep.

He laughed softly.

"Sorry, didn't mean to leave you high and dry. But clearly not happening this time."

"Is Mr. Miyagi's truck here?"

"Nope," Daniel said suddenly feeling like he'd been through this conversation before. Maybe a couple of times.

"No Dutch?"

"Nope."

Daniel wanted to tell him to hurry up with whatever he wanted to do, it was kind of like watching someone trying to get organized before starting a project and Daniel was going to get frustrated and take over and he was trying not to this time.

He was trying to let Johnny try what Johnny wanted to try.

Curiosity and libido were at war and if Johnny didn't start something Daniel might die or ruin it.

Though having him leaving a bruise on his hip with his mouth was a new one, taking the scenic route was what Daniel realized Johnny was doing.

It was kind of ridiculous, maybe he'd just take care of it himself.

Johnny caught his hand, kissed the top of it, and interlaced their fingers and Daniel huffed a sigh.

Johnny was smiling, he knew what he was doing, taking his time and how frustrating it was.

Savoring.

Daniel wasn't something that needed to be savored. He was still a young guy, he didn't need the slow molasses build-up. He got turned on sometimes by the stupidest things sometimes. Watching the way Johnny did just about anything could set him off. Walking, running, fixing things, the way his hands moved across the pages of whatever book he was reading or across the steering wheel of the Avanti. The way he looked on a beach, frolicking in the ocean and having fun. Perfectly innocent things that his body just always reacted to.

But Johnny seemed to like the slow romantic foreplay.

Seemed to like to savor him and that was something that made his heart pound quickly in his chest.

A frantic excitement, that Johnny would take his time because he wanted to and because it was Daniel. He was opening his mouth and the panic flooded Daniel's veins.

"Wait."

Blue eyes flicked to him, curious, waiting, the tongue that had peaked out withdrawing back.

"Be careful," Daniel said.

"I'm not going to bite you Daniel," Johnny said amusement fighting with confusion on his brow. "Not unless you want me to."

Oh god.

"No, I mean...you don't have to."

"You don't want me to?"

"I do, but-"

He'd just been tormenting himself on how much he wanted this exact

thing and here he was cockblocking himself.

"Only do what you can handle," Daniel said. "I don't want you to choke."

Johnny looked down at Daniel's dick in his hand and studied it with an embarrassing level of attention. Like he was trying to figure out logistics now and Daniel covered his face in his hands.

"I don't want you to get hurt," Daniel said softly. A whisper into the air.

"Did it hurt you?" Johnny asked.

"Huh?" Daniel asked pushing himself up again, looking at Johnny. Focusing was difficult with the gentle lazy way Johnny was moving his hand. "No, it's just-"

Johnny lowered his head again and Daniel's planned sentence, the words he'd struggled to get to line up in a way that made sense scattered away and were replaced with a few choice surprise curses.

Daniel didn't have a clue what he was saying, lost them like they weren't even stopping in his brain for a visit to register before filling the air around them.

Johnny seemed amused by that, the faintest trace of a smile on his face as he bobbed his head.

Maybe if he could go back in time he'd tell himself, the version of himself being a brat about going to LA to hang in there.

Give it a year, you'll have a boyfriend enthusiastically giving you head like he'd been studying hard with one goal in mind.

Pre-LA him, warned with that future premonition would've avoided the beach that night, flirted with Johnny up a storm until he got that boy in his bed before a year.

One goal in mind, lure him into your bed sooner.

Because he won't leave once he's there, and the things you want him to do he'll do of his own volition without needing to ask.

Just let him try.

That would've been nice.

But this was also nice.

Even if he didn't know what to do with his hands.

Even if he wanted to grab Johnny but couldn't let himself.

Johnny might not get it, might not be thinking about how Kreese had choked him or the months of being hurt, of running when anything went near his neck, but Daniel remembered and he refused to let that happen again, to ruin the moment by trying to take control of the situation this time.

So he tried to find other things to hold onto, the bed was a good one.

Huh, if he thought about it it's what Johnny did.

Subconsciously keeping his hands to himself, probably also trying not to hurt Daniel then.

An unspoken moment of the same idea shared between them.

Not wanting to hurt one another, even though it took everything in Daniel not to move, to not chase the feeling building up, knowing if he could just hang in there, it'd be amazing and without an accidental reopening of an old wound.

Besides, maybe he could just keep talking, even if he couldn't keep track of what he was saying, coming undone easily from Johnny's tongue, led exactly where he dreamed to be.

Daniel thought he could train with Johnny.

But he learned he couldn't.

Not if they were alone.

He couldn't help himself.

It was like a dance.

It brought him close to Johnny in ways that even if he tried to focus on paying attention, on karate, it led his mind elsewhere, to getting Johnny out of his clothes as fast as possible, and based off the knowing smile and the way Johnny teased him it clearly was a similar thread running through Johnny's brain.

"Anytime you wanna train, I'll be there for you. No strings attached."

It's what Mr. Silver had said.

After the fifth or sixth time of trying to focus on sparing and not the way the sun hit Johnny's skin or his hair, the warm way his hands felt on him, Daniel realized he couldn't spar with Johnny with a goal in mind.

He couldn't prep for the tournament this way.

He needed somewhere to go and study.

But he was worried it'd hurt Johnny's feelings and Mr. Miyagi's.

He wanted them to relax. This was his problem. Not theirs.

Even so, going to the Cobra Kai dojo felt wrong.

Everything about the place felt wrong. From the sirens that went by as soon as he walked from his Ford to the door, to pushing the door open and watching Mr. Silver practice in his black gi.

He didn't know what he'd expected when he heard Mr. Silver say he was reopening the dojo. But he'd expected other students. Other people. But it was just Mr. Silver.

He didn't know if that was better or worse.

He wanted to say it was better.

No students should be in Cobra Kai, hell he didn't think he should be there.

But he also felt bad for Mr. Silver, trying to clean up the mess left behind by his friend, willing to create a place for people to go and practice, opening space up for Daniel. And Daniel needed a place to spar that didn't lead him to be dizzy with lust.

The whole place felt haunted, with Kreese's photos watching him and his cardboard cut out still by the door.

The bright dojo Daniel remembered stepping into what felt like so long ago had a darker dingy atmosphere.

He tried to chalk it up to it being evening.

That he'd come by after working in the shop.

"Listen, I gave your offer some thought." Daniel began as Mr. Silver walked over all smiles, hands on his hips. "And, um..."

"And?"

He felt so bad asking.

It felt like he was going behind Johnny and Mr. Miyagi's back. But Mr. Miyagi had his dream to focus on and Daniel couldn't stop focusing on Johnny.

With his luck, he'd accidentally trained himself into flirting with whoever he fought from now on and it'd get awkward.

"And if it's not too much trouble, I'd like to take you up on it. I mean, you know, just on a short-term basis."

Because eventually he'd figure out how to be balanced again after the fight with Mike, and he could enjoy kata with Mr. Miyagi and Johnny and he could keep things in separate compartments.

"No trouble, are you kidding? It'd be an *honor*. How does Mr. Miyagi feel about it?"

Daniel frowned, honor just felt wrong now.

It was like a red flag that sent up all the alarm bells in his head because of Chozen and Sato.

People seemed to always have their own definition of the word and how did he tell this guy who thought it'd be an honor to help train *him* that he was doing this behind Mr. Miyagi's back? That he wanted Mr. Miyagi to work on his dreams and not the constant fights Daniel found himself in?

He felt ashamed going behind his back but Mr. Miyagi didn't have time to teach him, didn't want to teach him for a tournament.

Mr. Miyagi always hoped there was a way out of it, a different path or route Daniel could take, but he could never find it.

It kept leading him to fights, even if he tried his hardest to run in the opposite direction.

Even if the tournament might end up being fake.

Even if he might never have to step onto the mat.

But Daniel was worried. He didn't like that the guys had gotten hurt and it felt like only a matter of time before Mr. Miyagi or Johnny got hurt.

He couldn't have that. Couldn't let that happen.

"Mr. Miyagi, he, um...he doesn't...He doesn't need to know about it, if..."

"But he *knows* you're competing," Mr. Silver said with a frown.

It was kind of like Mr. Silver was leaning in close without leaning in.

Johnny was taller than Daniel but didn't make him feel small.

He was like a nice tree to lean up against or to teasingly move so he could enjoy a bit of shade from the sun that always made Johnny laugh.

Mr. Silver was tall in a different way, imposing.

He made Daniel feel small like he was a mouse being inspected by a hawk or a big snake.

"Yeah. I mean, he knows that. He just...He doesn't approve."

"Well, everybody has a right to his opinion. Look I won't say anything."

Why did it have to come to this?

It felt bad.

The way he worded it made it sound like he was cheating. Like he'd gone over to the enemy's side and was betraying everyone.

He wasn't. He was just going to train in an actual dojo and learn some moves and try to focus on training.

He just needed the space, like a gym, to train where he wasn't distracted.

"Thanks," Daniel said softly with a nod.

"So, when do you want to start?"

"I mean, that's up to you. Whenever it's..." Daniel said shrugging.

This was a big favor.

He couldn't afford to pay right now.

The shop was out of the red but they still had to pay off the broken windows and the repair to the roof and get more bonsai.

He didn't have any other spot he knew of to go and train.

"Oh, hey, I got a gi hanging in the closet. I think it'll fit. What do you say we go right now?"

"Now?"

Daniel thought he'd need to fill out paperwork, that Mr. Silver would want him to pay *something*, or promise to pay something later.

Also whose gi was it in his closet that fit Daniel?

Didn't all the cobras take their stuff when they left?

Was it like some lost and found?

Daniel was pretty sure in comparison to all of Johnny's friends Daniel was the smallest.

How gross was that gi that no one had wanted to take it home?

Was it the snake?

Maybe all of the guys had left their gi's behind because like Johnny they couldn't handle it.

Couldn't stomach seeing that snake again.

He went into the locker room after Mr. Silver handed him the gi.

He stared at the snake longer than he should've. He didn't like it. Didn't like seeing it again, not this way.

But he put it on anyway.

He hadn't been able to figure it out for the tournament because Mr. Miyagi's training didn't include gi's.

Daniel didn't want to have to rely on Ali for that if he ever entered

another tournament again. And he'd even joked with Sato that it was the one thing he'd been especially bad at.

They'd had a day in Sato's dojo while Johnny was out with Kumiko and Yukie and Sato had shown him how it was meant to be worn, how to tie the black belt on.

He'd told Daniel that *Miyagi-san's karate needs no uniform. But for the rest of us it helps to separate. Time to fight, time to rest. Important to learn, like any other tradition, hmm custom. Like tea ceremony. Like dance.*

Chozen had rolled his eyes, from where he'd stood in the corner with his arms crossed.

Sato had wanted to show him a different move, something he'd created to take home.

For protection and good luck.

Like he'd known Daniel would get into more fights.

Like it was bound to follow him like some damn curse.

And teaching him the move, how to wear the gi was like a way to pass on his knowledge, a piece of his karate to go home with Daniel as an apology.

Sato's root karate was the same as Mr. Miyagi's, but who he was now, what he did was different. And he wanted to share that.

Told Daniel he looked forward to seeing what his karate would become one day.

Daniel didn't think he'd ever be so grateful for that lesson on how to wear a gi.

The whole situation would've been even worse if he'd had to have asked Mr. Silver for help. To explain with his head bowed in shame that he didn't know how to wear one.

The lights were on brighter in the dojo when he stepped back out, barefoot onto the mats.

A weird human-shaped monstrosity of wood and metal, like some demented game of hangman, stood in the corner.

Mr. Silver stood ready for him with red focus mitts, something Daniel

only knew a name for from the books Johnny had checked out for him.

He was nervous.

The fake person in the corner freaked him out a little.

It was made of thick wood but he reminded himself why he was there.

Just in case Mike Barnes didn't take Mr. Silver's threat seriously, in case he tried to fight someone else, in case things went south.

He would be ready.

Even if he'd had to walk straight into the cobra's nest to get the help he needed.

Chapter End Notes

> All the other librarians were super jealous that one of them got to meet Daniel and now will forever ask Johnny where Daniel is and why he didn't bring him with every time they see him.
> Johnny was worried they'd take away his cards and make him pick one.

Old Traditions and New

Johnny came home to find Daniel sitting on their bed with his foot in a foot bath with Mr. Miyagi looking sad, on his way out. He looked between the two of them setting his things down and hurrying over.

He'd gone to babysit the kids after work and after hours of kids shows and reading to them and making mac and cheese with little cut-up hot dog pieces in it he'd expected to come home to Daniel and Mr. Miyagi sitting around after dinner, not the tense atmosphere.

He sunk to his knees next to Daniel looking into the green bubbling water.

"What happened?" he asked looking up at Daniel.

"It's nothing," Daniel said waving off his concern.

"Was it Barnes? Did you drop a bonsai on your foot?" Johnny asked reaching for Daniel's ankle to look.

"I'll be fine. I just kicked some 2 by 4s."

"Why would you do that?" Johnny asked, voice tight, looking up at Daniel who sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"Great question," he said with a sigh, flopping back on the bed. "I thought I could do it."

Johnny gently set Daniel's foot back in the water and laid down on the bed next to him. "You want to break boards?"

"I guess. Honestly, I just don't know what I'm doing. I just-" Daniel sighed covering his face with his hands.

"We've got Dutch's tournament soon, he's like specializing in breaking boards, maybe he'll have a bunch of tips and tricks you can use."

"You think?" Daniel asked looking at him, as Johnny wrapped his arms around him.

"Well you did break through a shit ton of ice," Johnny said. "You can probably break a 2 by 4 like Mr. Miyagi broke through that tree. It's not impossible, but Daniel, you gotta work your way up to it. You could break something by jumping into it kick first."

"Yeah?" Daniel asked, his eyes were glittery like they were full of unshed tears and Johnny kissed him softly.

"Yeah," Johnny said softly, running his fingers through Daniel's hair.

He smelled kind of weird.

Almost like the cigar smell of the Cobra Kai dojo. But it was so faint that Johnny thought it had to be something else. Like he walked through some smokers on the way home.

He made sure Daniel was comfortable, got snacks, and curled up next to him.

"That book you've been reading, will you read some of it to me?"

"Sure," Johnny said looking for his book, grabbing it as Daniel rested his head on Johnny's chest and he flicked back to the beginning, introducing Daniel to Marseilles and the *Pharaon.*

"Where's that?" Daniel asked, interrupting and looking up at Johnny.

"France."

Daniel frowned but quieted as Johnny continued, introducing him to Edmond Dante.

"He was a fine, tall, slim young fellow of eighteen or twenty, with black eyes, and hair as dark as a raven's wing; and his whole appearance bespoke that calmness and resolution peculiar to men accustomed from their cradle to contend with danger."

Daniel shifted, careful to keep the injured part of his foot in the water, rolling onto his side as Johnny read, wrapping his arm around him.

After a while, while Dantes was explaining that he didn't think he had any enemies who might be out to get him, bewildered as to why he'd gotten into trouble, he realized Daniel had fallen asleep.

He carefully shut the book and set it aside. Daniel's long dark lashes fanning over his cheeks, his lips parted as he slept.

Johnny glanced around their room, at the bonsai on the desk.

"Think he's going to be okay?" he asked it quietly.

Daniel was smart, he knew better than to go around kicking 2 by 4s

and hurting himself.

He'd looked distraught like he knew it'd been a bad idea but hadn't been able to stop himself, hadn't been able to figure an out.

Like there was some gang out there that he was determined to join where you had to kick 2 by 4s to get in. It was like he was a kid trying to fit in with the cool kids but being hazed.

He ran his fingers gently over Daniel's shoulder looking at the bonsai with a frown.

He didn't understand why Daniel was kicking wood when he was focused on training and the shop. But he waited a bit, then carefully pulled away.

He tucked Daniel into bed drying off his foot then heading off to shower.

When he came back Daniel was still asleep, gripping Johnny's pillow tight.

Johnny turned off the lights and sunk down onto his side of the bed, gently tugging at his pillow.

Daniel rolled over knee going between Johnny's legs just barely escaping an accidental injury.

Daniel shifted on top of him like he'd been looking for him in his sleep and as soon as Johnny was there again he wasn't moving.

Johnny's ears burned and he breathed an unsteady breath through his mouth.

He wondered if he'd ever get used to it.

He was starting to doubt it.

Daniel always found ways to get under his skin and this time, it was by tangling up their legs the way necklaces got tangled up in a jewelry box together.

The guys came home almost every weekend, a loud arrival breaking the quiet of Mr. Miyagi's home.

Johnny would've worried if he hadn't seen how Mr. Miyagi prepared for their arrival.

The way he went shopping for snacks before they arrived.

The way he restocked the fridge, asked about what Daniel and Johnny thought they'd like to have for dinner over the weekend because they almost always spent the night.

If he didn't see the smile on his face when they piled in greeting Mr. Miyagi warmly.

Sometimes they came early, surprising them in the shop and every time it happened Mr. Miyagi was delighted and put them to work.

He didn't know if the guys realized how happy seeing them all made Mr. Miyagi, or even how he liked talking to Johnny's mom when she came to ask questions about her bonsai.

But it was a relief that they weren't destroying the man's peace and quiet. A relief that he seemed to look forward to the company in his own way.

Jessica came over for dinner sometimes when the guys were over and the little table Mr. Miyagi had would become crowded, but it wasn't a problem, sitting around chatting with bowls of food in hand.

Jessica asking them about classes and the going-ons of UCLA.

She'd tell them about the running with Dutch and Daniel, map out the rock climbing she wanted to do for the weekend.

They'd complain about the fact she wanted to go early in the morning but it was all playful.

They'd all go anyway.

It didn't matter how early, how tired they were from a week of classes and partying but they'd show up and herd Daniel and Johnny out the door to meet Jessica at whatever rock she'd picked that weekend to go climbing.

They'd take Dutch's van Saturday mornings after breakfast with Mr. Miyagi, always asking if he wanted to go rock climbing with them and Mr. Miyagi would smile but shake his head, had stuff to do.

So they'd drive down to the shop and pick up Jessica who'd sit in the

back with Johnny and Daniel.

She looked so happy.

Every Saturday morning with all her gear climbing into the van.

They'd drive out to Joshua tree, following her instructions on what to do the first time.

A million questionns directed her way that she seemed to love. Answering their questions, and showing off as she scaled the rock face like it was nothing, easy, while the guys huffed and puffed their way along.

They did Echo Cliffs a couple of times, Jessica slowly building up the difficulty as they went through all the rock climbing in the area and they were getting better at it.

They had less questions for her.

Knew what to do to stop and just hang out, literally, along the rocks, and to enjoy the view.

And it seemed to help Daniel.

To get out with the guys and take a moment to stop and enjoy the view.

Though he usually was slower, taking his time up or down the mountain.

Enjoying the sunrise as it broke over the horizon.

It seemed to bring him some peace, to help him rebalance.

Johnny had never thought about rock climbing before, but he got it.

Knowing he could scale a mountain with just some rope and a few tools gave him a level of comfort in himself like he knew if some bastard tried to start a fight with him he'd probably be fine, but now he knew if he had to climb a mountain he could do that too.

Not that there seemed to be many emergencies in his life that would lead to that, but it was still comforting. And the sunrises were always stunning.

He looked back at Daniel in his orange puffy jacket looking out at the

sunrise, thinking.

He was always so slow when they climbed up the mountain but faster going down.

He talked, it wasn't like he was quiet the whole time.

He talked with Jessica and the guys and Johnny.

At first complaining about the process, how scary it was, W*hy'd she do this for fun? This was fun? They were all going to die!*

But now that he no longer was focused on what was right in front of him, now that he could expand his view, relax and enjoy the things pointed out, like *hey check out that hawk, or look there's the van, it's so tiny*.

While they were hiking along one of the cliffs to get started Daniel hooked his arm through Johnny's and leaned in close pointing out into a crevice.

"Mr. Miyagi planted a bonsai in there for safekeeping," he whispered.

"Yeah?" Johnny asked, it looked unsafe to go down.

They walked a little closer and he saw water coming in.

It had to fill up.

He spotted the little tree, it looked exactly like the design on Daniel's gi, on the patch on his red jacket he was wearing, on the red jacket Daniel had worn to the o-bon festival.

"That's a scary-looking one," Dutch said. "We climbing down that?"

Jessica laughed.

"No, there's another spot, that one fills with water, it's not safe."

They followed her along the rocky outcropping to a good spot.

Dutch was talking about his upcoming tournament.

His parents said they were coming.

He was trying to sound nonchalant about it.

Like it wasn't a big deal. Like he wasn't trying to get his hopes up again.

But Johnny could see it.

He wanted his parents there.

He wanted them to watch, to be there in the crowd.

He was getting his hopes up again.

They'd have to prepare in case his parents flaked.

Dutch would shrug his shoulders, say it hadn't mattered, but it would've.

The guy didn't see his parents often. Had grown up mostly alone, so every promised arrival of his parents got him excited, hopeful.

He met Bobby's eyes and knew he was thinking the same thing.

He nodded to Johnny. They'd do something. They'd be loud enough to drown out the silence where his parents were supposed to be. Because they *knew*.

They'd seen how disappointed Dutch had been at their first tournament, looking through the crowd for his parents, unable to find them, the way his shoulders had sagged adding it to the litany of other broken promises.

Johnny had recommended they go out for pizza afterward, just the five of them.

Nothing fancy.

The older kids went out to some restaurant with Kreese, but Dutch needed attention, not to disappear in the crowd or in the shadow of the older kids.

They'd ridden their bikes there afterward, following Johnny to a hole in the wall he liked with cheap but good pizza and crowded around a booth, sticking Dutch in the middle so he couldn't escape.

Well, he could've.

He could've climbed over the back of the booth seat or over the table but he didn't.

They talked about the fight, Johnny breaking down all the stuff he'd noticed the guys do, their strengths, what they'd done well while they ate greasy pizza and drank soda.

They listened to him and he remembered his heart pounding wondering if it'd been the right idea, to cheesily tell them what they were good at after a tournament when Dutch hadn't even placed.

When he'd lost and his parents had broken their promise.

But their eyes had been on him and he'd kept going.

He'd been reading all the books he could on karate and tournaments.

And it'd paid off, he knew for his own final match why he hadn't won, how to improve to win next time. What he should've done.

He didn't know if they'd want to hear that. What they should've done. But he was excited to go home and tell his Mom about it, about his first tournament, about how the guys had done because she wanted to know.

He'd thought, back then, Sid wanted to know too.

Dutch started to sit up a little straighter, that feral look he had sometimes fading listening to Johnny heap praise on him, telling him he was doing good, and it was their first tournament and they'd done better than the other newbies from other karate clubs and dojos. They'd done better than the other kids in their *own* dojo.

Bobby had held up his cup of soda, a short speech and they cheers'd to a better tournament next time, to kicking everyone's ass in the future.

Maybe they'd go to pizza afterward again, or maybe Dutch would have something with his taekwondo friends.

Johnny wasn't sure as he made his way back down the mountain by rope next to Daniel who was talking about the shop, how he was thinking maybe they should print out care guides because so far it was all on Mr. Miyagi. Little pamphlets so Mr. Miyagi didn't have to talk to *every* customer before they left.

Johnny agreed.

The care guide Mr. Miyagi had written him, in the beginning, had been invaluable. He still had it somewhere. He'd worn the paper thin,

reading it so much, over and over again, until he'd memorized every word, every stroke of Mr. Miyagi's pen.

When rock climbing was done they went out for brunch.

It was a nice way to spend their Saturdays, like a continuation of the hiking he and Daniel had done for their dates, but with friends.

As the month continued on the tournament plans revved up.

Jessica hadn't ever been to a tournament and when they went on their lunch break they'd talk about it.

Daniel would talk about the one All-Valley he fought in and Johnny would talk about all the tournaments he'd been in.

What he expected, what he was curious about, comparing Taekwondo and karate.

She said she was ready to cheer on Dutch, excited to see the fights.

On the morning of the tournament, Johnny walked with Daniel through the crowd with Jessica and Mr. Miyagi to find their seats in the gymnasium.

He saw Bobby and the guys in their seats, waving out towards them, saw Mrs. Douglas with her son sitting near the front who waved at him as they passed.

Bobby hadn't lied.

There were a *lot* of girls in the group with him, near the seats the guys had been saving. Wearing sorority t-shirts and UCLA gear. There'd been a bus out front.

"Did you all come with the girls?" Johnny asked sitting down next to Bobby.

"Yeah, we hitched a ride on the bus with them," Jimmy said.

There was a girl sitting next to him who smiled and held out her hand.

Jimmy looked pleased.

"Johnny right? I'm Jenny," she said with a smile.

Johnny shook her hand.

"Nice to meet you," Johnny said introducing her to Daniel, Jessica, and Mr. Miyagi.

He was looking through the crowd and laughed, in the middle of the sorority group was Gabriella and her grandmother. Abuela looked so small among all the college girls but looked delighted. One of the girls was chatting with her in Spanish. Gabriella caught his eye and she waved. Johnny waved back.

"Gabriella ride with you all too?" he asked amused.

"No, they were here first and one of the girls knew her so they just surrounded them. I learned that Abuella used to go to oh what's it called? Lucha libre matches when she was younger and Gabriella said her grandmother's been looking forward to it since Dutch mentioned it. Said her grandmother would've come and got her even if she hadn't already planned to come."

"She does know it's not wrestling right? Like it's not the same thing right?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah, I think Abuela's just excited to see some fighting. Gabriella translated it to, *watching Dutch kick some ass*."

There was a blonde sitting next to Tommy that Johnny hadn't clocked yet.

He leaned forward a bit trying to figure out who Tommy was talking with but Bobby grabbed his hand and put a disposable camera in his hand.

"You've got a job," Bobby said.

"Right," Johnny said looking down at the camera.

"Pass one down to Daniel and Jessica. See if Mr. Miyagi wants one."

"Won't they all be from the same angle?"

"I guess," Bobby said with a shrug. "But if one of us is shit at taking photos and it's blurry then there's like four or more chances."

"Got it," Johnny said passing them down. Tapping Daniel's thigh and handing him the cameras.

He stopped his conversation with Jessica only for a split second, hand going to take Johnny's only to realize Johnny was handing him something not asking to hold his hand. He looked down at the camera then up at Johnny.

"Pass it down please."

Daniel took them, handing one to Mr. Miyagi and Jessica. The row in front of them was empty, they were near the front, and as the announcer walked out welcoming them in Korean and then swapping over to English, explaining the rules and the plan Johnny watched a fashionably dressed blonde walk in followed by a couple in black suits still wearing sunglasses and looking uncomfortable.

It was his Mom, she reached back taking Mrs. Dutch's hand and pulling her along to their seats in front of Johnny and his friends.

"Oh thank fucking god," Bobby said relaxing next to him as the Dutch's parents sat down in front of them, as they nodded to Johnny and his mom reached back to pat his knee and smile at them.

"I wasn't expecting my mom to come," he said surprised.

"Dutch invited her in person. And Jimmy explained during one of their meetings how his parents never show up. She must've dragged them here. Bless your Mom."

"Yeah, but she said she didn't want to come because she didn't want to see him hurt," Johnny whispered back.

The tournament started and Johnny watched.

He'd never been in the seats before.

He hadn't expected it to be so popular.

At most of his tournaments, he ignored the crowd because it was his opponent's parents and friends and none of them were cheering him on. So he tuned them out. But it was different being in the crowd for a friend.

Daniel's hand found his and Johnny glanced over.

He was watching, studying the moves of the tournament with his lips in a straight line.

Not happy or upset, focused. Like he was prepared for this to be him

soon, to see how a different tournament did it, to take in moves he could use himself.

Two people stepped out and held out boards, three at different levels, and Dutch walked out jumping up and breaking each one of them before his feet touched the ground again.

"Shit that was cool," Bobby said from his side and Johnny nodded.

After a couple of groups showed off what they could do the tournament began.

Dutch went through several rounds ending up in the semi-finals which made the atmosphere electric. Surrounded by people there especially invested in Dutch. And Dutch seemed aware of it, Johnny caught his eyes, watched as Dutch took in the guys and the girls and grinned and then his eyes flicked down to see his parents and Laura and he smiled. Head held high as he turned and listened to his teacher. His *Sabomnim*.

It was impressive to watch him go, light on his toes, darting around the mat, faster than he'd ever been in karate.

He got first place in his class and Johnny itched to go down and congratulate him. Grinning as Dutch's parents stood up cheering loudly when he won, when he was handed his trophy, almost as loud as the group around them. All that hard work paid off.

"I'm going to ask him how he cuts through boards," Daniel said softly from his side.

"He is a good person to ask now. Award-winning champion of cutting boards," Johnny said with a teasing smile on his lips, rolling the film in his disposable camera to get one last shot of Dutch's parents talking animatedly to his mother.

He had plenty of Dutch, at every step along the way.

He just hoped they'd turn out good.

He wondered if they'd take him out for pizza, or steak if he'd have something he wanted to do with his parents, if they'd be willing to hang around long enough to do something, or if his taekwondo club would have plans.

He'd have to be prepared to be flexible.

It was Dutch's win and they'd see him when they saw him.

The guys were talking animatedly as they crowded around outside, waiting to see if they could congratulate Dutch.

The sorority girls had descended on his *sabomnim* with questions, she'd looked a little startled at first but had warmed up quickly, they'd taken Gabriella and Abuela with them, like they were honorary sisters they weren't letting go of.

"So what are you doing now?" Johnny asked Bobby.

"We figured we'd go home for a bit, then maybe spar a bit with Daniel," Bobby said with a stretch. "Go rock climbing. You know the usual fun."

Johnny poked him in the stomach grinning as Bobby jumped, swatting at his hands.

"The usual fun huh? Is Jenny joining?"

"I don't know, you'll have to ask Jimmy. They've just started hanging out more. He's pretty smitten."

Johnny turned to look for Jimmy and spotted Tommy and the girl he was talking to.

The other guy who was with them.

Johnny stiffened, his arm going around Daniel and pulling him in before he could walk off to find Dutch.

"Johnny?" Daniel's muffled voice came from his chest.

He gently swatted at Johnny before letting out a huff of air, frustrated, stewing but not trying to free himself.

"What the hell Bobby?" Johnny asked.

Bobby blinked at him then turned.

"Yeah, shit, so that wasn't my doing. Dutch invited her as a joke and she invited her boyfriend. Tommy's playing buffer."

Johnny knew Daniel was good with Ali, but her boyfriend was...he didn't know about that.

"What's wrong?" Jessica asked.

"Our ex is here," Johnny said stiffly.

"Ali?" Daniel asked, still quietly muffled, trying to pry himself free again, pushing himself on tiptoes to look over Johnny's arm to see her. Johnny covered his eyes with his hand.

"Yeah," Johnny said with a frown.

Damn Daniel was wiggly.

"You both have the same ex?" Jessica asked with a laugh. "I'm adding it to the *your life is a soap opera* list. Is it on bad terms?"

She was looking at him pointedly.

"Er, Daniel and her still get along, but she cheated on him, with uh," Johnny motioned to the football player.

"Oh," Jessica said glancing over, "*Oh*!"

"Yeah, and I don't, we're not in *bad* place, but I'm not a fan of...either of them."

Daniel bit his pec through his shirt and Johnny yelped letting go, hand going to his chest.

Daniel smoothed out his hair. "I'm *fine* Johnny. I'm not scared of some college football player," he said reaching out and taking Jessica's hand. "I'll introduce you."

"You were smothering him," Bobby said softly.

"He's going through enough, he didn't need-" Johnny sighed rubbing at his chest. "Little fucking piranha."

Bobby laughed softly throwing an arm around him, gently bumping his head against Johnny's. "It's kind of nice."

"Nice?" Johnny asked looking at Bobby in horror.

"Yeah, I mean that's something I would've expected *before* Daniel to do. You know? Bite you in the tit."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You and Daniel were always play fighting on top of actual fighting you know? Before Okinawa and you guys dating and this Mike Barnes stuff. Reminds me of the old him. I was getting worried."

"Can't believe your fucking happy that my boyfriend bit me."

"I mean doesn't he bite you anyway? I don't know why you're so unhappy," Bobby said poking at a spot on Johnny's neck near his shoulder that he knew was bruised from Daniel's mouth.

Johnny swatted at Bobby who laughed. "My *Mom* is here, *Mr. Miyagi* is here."

"You are as red as a tomato," Bobby said with a grin. "Listen I get you were trying to protect him, but like he's safe here. Tommy is over there and he took Jessica. Plus he and Ali are on good terms. Just let them hang out for a second."

Johnny heard familiar footsteps and swallowed down the petulant complaint on his tongue to turn and look at his mother who ruffled his hair.

"You survived not jumping after the ref," Johnny said.

"Yeah, I'm proud of myself," she said with a smile dipping her head down to kiss him on the cheek. "Though it helped that Mr. and Mrs. Dutch were louder than me with every complaint."

Johnny nodded with a smile watching as Dutch walked out, changed out of his uniform, and was met immediately by his parents. "Thanks for bringing them."

"Of course, all these boys are precious to me. A guy wants his parents with him, I will make it happen. Though the power I wield is a little dangerous, it's going to my head. I didn't even have to ask much. I just mentioned I had heard Dutch had a tournament coming up and they jumped. *Do you want to come with us?* Figured if they had someone else to go with they couldn't back out. Though uh, getting them out of their black tinted van was a feat. I promised we'd have dinner," she leaned down and whispered softly. "I don't think they have a lot of friends actually, so this is probably good. Almost feels like I've befriended like a very lonely kind of paranoid Addams family," she said smiling.

"They're nice," Johnny said.

"How is it both of you are on their friend list and none of the rest of us are?" Bobby complained.

"Oh I wouldn't say that," Laura said reaching out and pulling Bobby into the hug. "Besides, you know we love you too right?"

Bobby grumbled into the hug but was smiling.

"He kicked ass didn't he?" Laura said with a smile. "Is this how all your tournaments were?"

"No, we didn't have such an intense cheering team."

Laura's smile faltered and she let go to cup Johnny's face. "I'm sorry honey."

"It's okay," Johnny said. "I always had the guys and Dutch-" Johnny paused turning to look out at Dutch smiling, actually beaming and so happy as he talked to his parents. "He's needed this."

Laura smiled smoothing Johnny's hair before wrapping her arm around his shoulder. Johnny wanted to tell her that this also was nice. Just being with her, cheering on Dutch together with his friends and Daniel, and being in the crowd of so many people cheering for the same person. To see Dutch get the recognition he deserved.

Goal in mind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daniel met Ali's new boyfriend officially and it was weird. But this he could handle. He could meet his ex-girlfriend's boyfriend. He could do it with a smile on his face when he asked if Daniel was dating Jessica because he was still holding her hand.

Daniel grinned and he threw his thumb over his shoulder.

"Nah, I'm dating the blonde," he said motioning to Johnny who still has a sour look on his face rubbing his pec.

Maybe that'd been a bad choice, but it'd also been satisfying.

The football player glanced between the two of them. Johnny with some other guy's arm around his shoulder and Daniel holding some girl's hand. Let him be confused. It was fine.

It was refreshing. Normal. This was what everyone else dealt with, awkwardly running into their ex and the new person they were dating. It wasn't related to karate in the slightest. Daniel could breathe so easily.

Ali talked about her classes, promised that they should meet up soon, especially after Jessica, leaning forward voice low, responding to *how'd your summer go* with "He fought to the death in Okinawa."

Daniel watched as Ali's boyfriend who was still puzzling over Johnny, looked back down to Daniel, like had to take this information in and readjust his opinion and preconceptions and that was satisfying.

"Okay, we seriously have to catch up. You went to Okinawa?"

"Yeah, Johnny came with."

"That's what Tommy said," she said turning and smacking him on the chest.

"Their life is like a soap opera huh?" Jessica asked with a grin.

"Jessica, I like you, how long are you in LA for? I need someone else

to fill me in on all the excitement I missed."

Jessica looked delighted by this. Delving into their workout routine to get Daniel back into fighting shape for the All-Valley.

"But you're-"

"Yeah I know," Daniel said. "I've been cornered by guys so hopped up on karate to the point they barely have any brain cells left who are determined I fight again."

"Daniel," Ali said, voice full of concern. "That's awful."

"Yeah, which is why," Daniel said turning towards the crowd gathering around Dutch. "I'm going to see if he can teach me how to kick some boards."

"Kick some boards why?"

"My teacher wants me to break 2 by 4s," Daniel said absently trying to watch what Dutch was doing, where he was heading off, trying to decide if he could ask tonight or tomorrow.

"Teacher? 2 by 4s? Daniel, what are you talking about?"

"He said it's the only way I'll win, he made it look easy, cut through it with his foot like butter," Daniel said. "We'll get brunch," he said shooting her and her boyfriend a grin and let go of Jessica's hand to go find Dutch.

Watching Dutch kick through those boards made him realize there had to be a trick to it. That the closet he was going to get to figuring it out was by asking Dutch.

It wasn't impossible after all Mr. Silver had done it. Plus Mr. Miyagi had broken like a huge piece of wood with his hands.

Dutch was talking to his parents who clapped him on the shoulders, said a few quick things and then walked off, grabbing Mrs. Lawrence who'd been talking to Johnny.

She looked surprised, kissed Johnny's forehead, and followed after them.

Johnny's arms were still folded across his chest, his face was still a little pink. His eyes found Daniels and Daniel smiled. He'd make it up to him.

"Okay, what did you do to Johnny?" Dutch asked arm coming around Daniel.

"Bit him, probably overdid it," Daniel said.

Dutch laughed. "Bit him huh? I used to bite people, parents are glad I outgrew it, and here you are being a menace to society with no grumpy adults around to complain about it. So, what can I do for you?"

Was it that obvious Daniel wanted something? He kicked at the ground beneath his feet.

"Yeah, uh you kicked through boards, think you could kick through something thicker?"

"Thicker?" Dutch asked.

"Yeah, you know that guy with the book?"

"Daniel," Dutch said softly, concern in his tone.

"Well he's been helping me and well I want to kick through boards."

Dutch studied him a moment, before hauling his bag over his shoulder and giving Daniel's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "

Yeah okay, I'll add it to this weekend's hang-out plans."

Daniel relaxed, relieved.

"Thanks."

"No problem, it'll be fun to show off some more."

They ended up going out for pizza at some little hole in the wall and the guys seemed so at ease, with Jessica and Mr. Miyagi among them.

Bobby had said the girls had gone after Dutch's teacher to ask her a million questions and Johnny was talking.

They'd egged him into it. And Dutch was batting his eyes in an exaggerated way that had Jessica and Daniel laughing until Johnny talked. Breaking down the fight, praising all of Dutch's hard work, until at the end he held up his cup.

"You kicked ass! Sorry Mr. Miyagi."

Dutch laughed quickly raising his glass.

"Hell yeah, I did," Dutch said with a big smile on his face.

Was this the cobras from before? One of those things they did from long ago?

A tradition that was there's that they'd let them into?

Like going to the carhop with Johnny or up to the lodge?

It was so nice, all these places they let him into. That they didn't even think twice about. Dutch could've done anything after his tournament but he chose this. And Daniel could see it, those five boys after All-Valley tournaments sitting around talking about the fight and eating pizza, making Johnny go over the highlights. He wondered though what it'd been like after the last All-Valley. Had the tradition been broken? Or had they all sat here unable to say a word, going through the motions but not feeling it? Had Johnny been there? Had they waited for Johnny hoping he'd walk through that door but knowing he wouldn't join them that time? Hurt but not able to blame him or be upset at him, more upset with themselves and Kreese. Betrayed?

Dutch was saying something and Daniel tried to reel his focus back in. Something about how nice it'd been to having his parents finally show up. Not exactly like that but it was clear and bold what he meant between the lines, of having the guys bring so many friends to come and cheer him on.

Touched.

Daniel patted his arm a big grin.

"Of course," he said.

Dutch blinked looking up at him with a warm smile. "I knew I made the right choice telling Johnny we had to keep you."

"Keep me?" Daniel said with a laugh looking back at Johnny who was blushing and trying to hide it behind a sip of his soda.

But he didn't deny it reaching over and taking Daniel's hand in his, thumb brushing over the back of his hand.

Even their traditions were healing.

Daniel refused to give up.

He'd broken so many boards under Dutch's teaching. After Dutch had showed him the right way.

He thought he had it and was ready to face that monster in Mr. Silver's Cobra Kai studio.

He'd take care of the legs.

But then as their lesson continued as he squared up he realized Mr. Silver wanted him to go for the ribs.

For the chest.

Make the guy stop breathing.

It was fucked up.

Everything Mr. Silver was teaching him was fucked up.

But he was tired of people not leaving him alone. Mr. Silver paused, tilting his head when Daniel hesitated.

"Mr. LaRusso, what are you hoping to accomplish? You want to do this to win the tournament right?"

Daniel frowned.

He didn't care about winning the tournament.

He just wanted to go back to the quiet time he'd had with Johnny.

He wanted to keep him safe.

Didn't want anyone to put their hands on him again, not like Chozen who'd just waltzed up behind him, held a knife to his throat, and then like Mr. Miyagi, Johnny was too forgiving.

The thought of what sort of nightmare would happen if Johnny ran into Barnes was stressing him out.

He worried that Johnny just wouldn't run.

Wouldn't get away fast enough.

"I want to keep my boyfriend safe," Daniel said, eyeing the wooden

practice dummy.

Mr. Silver had turned the face on to show Mike Barnes.

He hesitated to throw the punch though.

He'd gotten out of a fight to the death without killing Chozen.

He could figure a way out of this.

But he couldn't

"I can't help you if you don't take my help," Mr. Silver said with a sad sigh, shaking his head and walking away.

Daniel hated that.

Hated disappointing people.

He already had disappointed Mr. Miyagi.

He was already screwing up, he couldn't *keep* screwing up.

He sighed, if only it'd been the legs, he couldn've taken the legs.

But he sighed, looking at the wooden planks, hauled back and punched.

His knuckles immediately bled.

He grimaced.

He kept at it.

At home Johnny caught him trying to sneak around, caught his injured arm, the bloody knuckles and his eyes widened with concern.

He didn't say anything though, glancing up at Daniel's face, studying him for a moment before gently bandaging him up in their room, using the first aid kit and the green powder.

But then he pulled Daniel into his arms, careful of his hand, careful of his arm that he'd been holding to him when Johnny had found him.

"If there's anything I can do," Johnny whispered.

"Just be here," Daniel said after a while, leaning back against him, breathing in that freshly showered smell, twisting slightly in his arms, pressing his nose against his warm neck. Closing his eyes. "Just stay right here with me."

Chapter End Notes

Terry Silver to his people following Daniel around "Find his boyfriend".
Then when he gets a manila folder, he doesn't look at it. He just passes it to Barnes and his friends.
"Go introduce yourselves."

Self Defense

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny was sitting outside a cafe reading. Daniel and Mr. Miyagi were out getting more bonsai, he was supposed to meet Jessica but her aunt had gotten some rush orders, she was going to be late. He didn't want to hang out at the shop by himself so he'd gone to a cafe. Thought he'd try something new and she'd meet him there. It felt fitting to sit reading a French book while sitting at a cafe.

"Hey man, you LaRusso's boyfriend?"

Johnny blinked looking up at three guys. Mike Barnes hands were on the table in front of him and he was leaning forward with a sneer.

Looked like his element of surprise was gone.

"Yeah, and?" Johnny asked. "You the boyfriend police? Need to check some credentials?"

"We just want to have a chat," one of the other guys said pulling Barnes back.

"A chat huh? About?" Johnny asked.

A fist grabbed the front of Johnny's shirt, trying to pull Johnny in. He liked that shirt it'd been a gift from Tommy, so he leaned forward with it, glancing at the fist then up at Barnes.

"Don't want LaRusso to get cold feet, so we'd like to remind him what's at stake."

"How many hits to the head have you gotten?" Johnny asked gently placing his hand over the fist on his shirt.

"Just want to talk," the guy said again, the little Tweedle-dee behind Barnes. Tweedle-dum didn't seem to be paying much attention, checking out the waitress.

"We are talking, aren't we?" Johnny asked, raising an eyebrow at the guy with the necklaces. "Or is this not talking? Is that some slang from whatever sewer you all crawled out of?"

"Listen here-"

"Are you going to punch me or kiss me? Because I'd rather the first honestly. I'm pretty happily taken and you're not my type."

It worked.

Barnes hauled back his arm and Johnny shifted so it wouldn't do as much damage when it connected with his face.

He'd have a black eye, but, *Sorry Mr. Miyagi*, Barnes hit first which meant it was a free for all now and Johnny could not wait.

He stood up grinning looking down at the guy. Barnes looked up startled, eyes growing wide for half a second as Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum realized what was happening.

"This can't be the right guy," Tweedle-dee said.

Barnes opened his mouth to say something but Johnny stopped him with a punch to the face, stepping out of the way of the cafe tables and chairs.

"Snake, man, what do you wanna do?" Tweedle-dum asked.

Barnes looked pissed. Determined.

That was fine.

Johnny had time.

He had plenty of revenge to get.

A black eye for Jimmy.

A kick to the stomach for Jessica.

He didn't know how to get revenge for Daniel though. He wasn't going to destroy some shop just to get glass in the bastard's arm.

But he could keep hitting.

Let *him* run this time.

Barnes got a few hits in, but Johnny barely noticed. He'd done a good job of letting his anger go, but this guy was like a dog with a bone. Wouldn't stop.

He wouldn't kill him. He wouldn't permanently injure him. Even though it'd be so damn easy to snap his stupid arm. Even if he thought it might make him feel better.

Johnny grabbed Barnes's shirt, hauling him forward. "You and your little friends leave Daniel and Mr. Miyagi, the shop, and Jessica alone. If I hear you were skulking around again you will not like what will happen."

Barnes turned his head with a scowl on his face and spat out a gob of blood. He'd heal. Johnny hadn't hurt him too badly, just roughed him up. Had show restraint.

"Fuck you."

"No thanks, *again*, not you're not my type. But hey, you're the one who wanted to talk, since you care so much about this tournament. Whose your sensei? Which dojo are you fighting for?"

Barnes looked away from him scowling.

Johnny flicked his forehead.

"Is there anything in there?"

Barnes let out a string of curses. "I study at Cobra Kai okay you bastard."

"I figured."

"You figured-" Barnes hauled off on a bunch of curses trying to pry Johnny's fist from his shirt.

"Yeah, so whose your sensei? Kreese?" Johnny asked, proud of himself for saying the name aloud without tripping over it, without his voice shrinking.

"Fuck no man, Silver."

"Silver?"

"Yeah, you got shit in your ears? Terry Silver. Now let go."

Johnny let go frowning as Tweedle-dum and Snake grabbed Barnes and ran.

The name was familiar he just couldn't place it. He wondered if it was

the guy who snuck into the house.

He should ask, he turned.

They were gone.

Damn, he shouldn't have let Barnes go.

A hand came down on Johnny's shoulder and he turned.

The waitress was holding a packet of peas.

"For your eye hon," she said with a soft smile.

"Thanks," Johnny said. "Sorry for the commotion."

"It's fine, that the guy you warned us about?"

"Yeah," Johnny said softly.

"You let me know if you need anything," she said.

"Thank you," Johnny said sitting down at the table he'd vacated.

He didn't normally get into fights in front of adults. But she seemed so unfazed.

He'd warned every shop he'd gone into about Barnes and the guy with the slicked-back hair when they were telling them about the grand opening.

After Daniel and Mr. Miyagi would walk out, he'd handed over the grand opening flyer and told them about Barnes and the mysterious guy who broke into Mr. Miyagi's house.

He warned them to be careful, come if they needed help.

"Holy shit Johnny!"

Johnny looked up to see Jessica.

"Hey," he said.

"What happened?"

"I met Barnes," he said with a grin.

It stung a little.

He must've busted his lip.

That sucked.

It'd hurt to kiss Daniel.

Should've hit Barnes harder.

"Shit, let me get you home. Where's the Avanti?"

Johnny laughed. "I think hanging around with Dutch has destroyed your vocabulary."

"You can complain like my aunt later. Give me those keys."

"I can drive," Johnny protested.

"With a black eye that's probably swelling? Yeah, I don't want to tell Daniel I let his precious boyfriend drive off with a black eye and got into a wreck. Come on you," she said pulling at his arm, grabbing his book, and sticking it under her arm.

"You taking him home?" the waitress called.

"Yeah, going to get him patched up," Jessica said.

"If anyone gives him trouble over it, come get me. Those boys started it," she called.

Johnny set the bag of peas down.

"No hon, take those with you, we got plenty."

"Thanks," Johnny said picking it up again and pressing it back to his eye.

They walked to the Avanti and Jessica stood with her hand held out impatiently, blocking him from the driver's seat.

"I-"

"Dude, I'll be gentle to your baby,"

Johnny scrunched his nose up.

"You have for sure been spending too much time with Dutch."

"You know what I mean. I know how much you like this car. I won't

scratch it. I'm a safe driver. Scouts honor."

Johnny frowned.

"You're a girl scout?"

"Well, not *now*, but like for a year when I was a kid. It still counts," Jessica held out her hand insistently.

Johnny didn't think that's how that worked, but she wasn't going to budge and his eye did hurt.

"You can't tell Daniel I let you drive."

"What? Why?"

"I don't let *anyone* drive."

"Okay, so?"

"So he's going to want to drive it. And I think I might faint if he tries."

She rolled her eyes taking the keys he reluctantly got out of his pocket, snapping them up before he'd even handed them over, and hurriedly slipped into the driver's seat fingers tapping at the wheel excitedly.

"Hey," he said.

Her head shot up looking at him.

"How badly am I bleeding? I don't want to bleed on my seats."

She studied him closely.

"You're fine Johnny. Just a nose bleed and some other cuts. But let's get you home 'kay?"

He sighed moving over to the passenger seat and sitting down carefully.

He watched her drive, hand gripping the bag of peas tightly and digging into his own knee to keep himself from trying to backseat drive.

She drove better than Louie Jr. at least.

She got him to Mr. Miyagi's in one piece. Parking and hopping out to open the front door with the key from Johnny's keyring.

She made him sit down in the kitchen and kept running around, asking where things were, darting around so much it made him a little dizzy. But when she had everything she needed she went to work very carefully patching him up.

She stayed, eating reheated tamales with him and making tea. She even brought his bonsai out and it was kind of nice to just sit and talk.

Daniel and Mr. Miyagi got back late at night.

Johnny had nearly forgotten the state of himself until Daniel was looking at him horrified, rushing over and practically onto Johnny's lap as he cupped his face in his hands.

"Who the hell-"

"I'm *fine* Daniel," Johnny said grabbing Daniel's wrists gently in his hands.

"You sure as hell do not look fine."

"I just met Barnes," Johnny said. "He didn't know who I was but knew I was your boyfriend, which was very weird."

Daniel leaned back on his heels stunned.

"Barnes did this?"

"It's not that bad Daniel. I'm okay. He looks much worse."

"Johnny-san," Mr. Miyagi said with a frown.

"He hit me first," Johnny said. "I just- I stopped the fight. I look, there was a witness, she said-"

"They started it," Jessica said sourly.

Mr. Miyagi sighed, walking towards the kitchen to start dinner.

Johnny looked at Daniel.

He looked so upset.

"*A man who can't breathe can't fight*," Daniel whispered.

Johnny frowned looking at him.

He looked on the verge of tears and yet more pissed than Johnny had ever seen.

"*A man who can't see can't fight."*

"Well that's not true," Johnny said softly.

They'd tried that once. The guys and he had gone camping and they'd tried to spar while blindfolded. Tommy was surprisingly good at it. Plus at one of the tournaments, there'd been a blind master who came and demonstrated his skills. No one could take him.

Daniel blinked, his shoulders were all stiff.

Johnny let go of his wrists and wrapped his arms gently around Daniel's waist.

"It wasn't all for naught. I think I kind of understand his fighting style now, and I found out which dojo he's with and the name of his sensei and-"

"I don't care. I'm going to kill him," Daniel said.

It was his tone that worried Johnny, the look on his face.

He was serious.

Johnny thought if any of them would kill Barnes it'd be himself.

Revenge for the torture he'd been putting Daniel through, but it was clear, something was wrong.

Daniel's knuckles were bloody again.

It was weird to see their hands like that, both of their knuckles red and damaged. Johnny's was bad but Daniel's was worse.

Daniel was furious in a way Johnny had never seen.

In a way that reminded him of the feral kittens, the shelter got from time to time. Where they didn't want anything, didn't trust anything, and even if you tried to give you food they'd hiss and claw at you. He couldn't tell Daniel that though. He was probably too mad to try and

burrito, plus that'd require moving him and he didn't look like he was going to budge.

"Daniel, don't kill him on my account," Johnny said trying to be light. "It'd be a waste of your punches. He's not worth the effort of burying him."

Daniel wasn't listening, his eyes were glassy.

It was clear he was memorizing every scratch, the blossom of the bruise now visible because the peas were set aside.

"Did you run?" Daniel asked softly.

Johnny frowned. "No. I stood my ground,"

One of the shiny angry tears fell down Daniel's cheek.

"I asked you to run. I didn't want you getting hurt."

"Well, I'm tired of watching *you* get hurt," Johnny said stiffly. "I'm not going to run from Barnes."

"*Johnny*," Daniel said with a frown.

"Did you forget somewhere along the way that I'm an All-Valley two-time champion? That I've been fighting for over 5 years?"

"But-"

"Nuh-uh," Johnny said. "No buts, I'm not going to stand by and let you fight this one on your own. I'm planning to be annoyingly fighting by your side until well after your hair turns grey. I get that fights are just going to pop up. But I can handle it. These muscles aren't just for show. Plus I know you could probably kill a man with these hands, but let's try to keep pushing murder off the table. huh? I don't know if they'll let me visit you in prison."

Jessica had walked off shortly after Mr. Miyagi had started dinner to call someone and came back sitting down next to them again.

"Why wouldn't they let you visit him?"

"I don't think they let guys have conjugal visits with other guys," Johnny said tilting his head. "I'd have to figure out how to get thrown into the same prison as him, and even then there'd be no guarantee."

Daniel's hands had fallen from the side of his face and now were holding onto his shirt.

"What?" Daniel asked voice almost a squeak of surprise.

Johnny turned to him. It looked like he'd shocked the darkness from his features.

Johnny cupped the side of his face.

"Prison for murder is quite a while, Daniel. I don't want you to get locked away. I want you to stay here with me."

He was blushing.

Johnny grinned, storm clouds averted. But he'd keep an eye out for it. That had sounded like someone else. Someone *like* Kreese. It sounded like Cobra Kai.

He ran his thumb over Daniel's cheek.

"You got out of a death match without murdering someone, I think that brain of yours can utilize the people around you to avoid murdering Barnes. If anyone can do it, it's you. You get thrown the weirdest shit, but you always figure it out, this won't be different. But this time, you've got plenty of people who have your back. Use us."

"He's right."

Johnny looked up, tilting his head to see Dutch whose eyes fell to his face.

He frowned but didn't say anything plopping down next to them.

Dutch leaned forward into their space looking at Daniel.

"It fucking sucks right?"

Daniel nodded.

"Are you alone?"

Daniel opened his mouth.

"You're not," Dutch interrupted. "The guys are only a half-hour away. They may bitch and moan but they're close. They didn't leave the state, hell technically they didn't leave the city. They didn't high tail it

overseas. You've got less than four months until hopefully, this nightmare is over. You've got Jessica across the street, you've got me a phone call away, you've got Johnny in your damn bed. You're not alone. You don't have to go mobster on us. You don't have to go over to the dark side. Okay? Unlike Okinawa, we've got your back because we're here. And hell if you'd asked, we'd have come to Okinawa. We show up for each other man, it's what we do. Good times, bad times, or if we're just fucking bored as shit. Plus man, you've got Mr. Miyagi. I know he's the bendiest go with the flow zen person you could possibly know and that can be frustrating when you want clear-cut action, but that man cares about you like a son. What's Mike Barnes got huh? Anger management issues? But Daniel you'll kick his ass in the ring if you want to do that *while* following the rules. Because you kicked our collective asses while following the rules. And Barnes ain't worth breaking them. And like look at Johnny man, yeah it fucking pisses you off to see him hurt, right? But like look at him. He's got a black eye, but it's like the ghost of one. Dude, he clearly moved out of the way to limit the damage. He's got a split lip, and a bruise on his cheek, but look at his *hands*, Daniel."

Johnny sighed moving his hands so Daniel could look at them.

Daniel took them gently in his, looking them over.

"That shit," Dutch said pointing at Johnny's knuckles. "Is from kicking ass. Like yeah, not happy he got into a fight again, it feels like the bad times again, but just looking at him I can tell he fucking won the fight. Yeah, Barnes got his pretty face, but I bet Barnes's face is all swollen right now and needs a shit ton more bags of peas than Johnny's one."

Dutch turned to Johnny.

"You kicked his ass right?"

"Yes," Johnny said.

"Good," Dutch said slapping his back with the palm of his hand.

Daniel was holding his hands.

Jessica hadn't bandaged them just cleaned them, something about letting the wounds breathe, saying she could wrap them later. He'd make sure they bandaged Daniel's as well.

Daniel let them go and shifted forward wrapping himself around Johnny with a shaky breath into Johnny's shoulder.

Johnny wrapped his arms around him, looking at Dutch with a raised eyebrow.

Dutch pointed at Jessica.

"She called, told me what happened, and asked if I'd give her a ride back down to her apartment."

Johnny ran his hands up and down Daniel's spine.

If he could figure out how to get rid of Barnes earlier before the tournament he would.

If he could figure out how to get rid of Cobra Kai, Terry Silver, and keep Kreese out of his life he would.

But for now, he'd focus on Daniel, on showing him he was fine, of supporting him, keeping an eye on any wounds that appeared that he didn't want to talk about.

Mr. Miyagi brought out dinner and they ate.

Daniel very reluctantly climbing out of his lap, sitting as close as he could.

Jessica and Dutch chatted amicably by them and Daniel talked, slow at first, but he was relaxing, chatting along.

Every once in a while though his hand came down onto Johnny's thigh like he was making sure he was still there, still solid and next to him, even though their shoulders were touching, even though Daniel's knee was over his, resting against his. Even though Johnny occasionally worried a circle into a new spot of Daniel's back with his hand. Trying to anticipate that worry, that concern, and to head it off by being more tactile himself. Trying to remind him he was fine and he was there.

Chapter End Notes

> When Snake, Dennis, and Mike Barnes return Silver is so confused. They hadn't brought back the manila folder, so he doesn't know what Johnny looks like or his name, but he thinks that if Daniel wants to protect him he's got to be smaller and not know how to fight, so how the heck did Barnes lose to such a little wimp?
> Barnes: He wasn't tiny! He knew how to fight!

Silver is starting to think good help is hard to find these days.

There's really only like two inches difference between the actors, but I figure when you go in thinking you're going to fight a pipsqueak nerd who's sitting at a cafe reading a book only to find out he's taller than you and full of muscle you kind of panic.

Field of Poppies

Daniel could not sleep well. He couldn't wrap his mind around how they'd found Johnny.

Had Barnes seen them together?

He'd already kissed Johnny in front of Jessica before telling her, without realizing it. Had he driven by while they were in the shop? Was he spying on them? He knew where they lived, knew where they worked.

Johnny rolled over in his sleep, his hands that Daniel had bandaged before bed despite Johnny's protests, wrapped around him.

Daniel looked up, blue eyes were open, he wasn't asleep.

"Go back to bed," Daniel said brushing hair from Johnny's forehead.

"I'm in bed," Johnny mumbled.

"You know what I mean," Daniel said a huff, wrapping his arms around Johnny's shoulders.

The bruises looked darker, worse in their room.

"Wanna talk?"

"No," Daniel said.

Johnny let out a snort of air, practically a laugh.

"What?"

"You *always* want to talk."

"Not always."

"*Always*," Johnny said with a soft yawn.

"Go back to sleep."

"No."

Daniel stared at him like he could force Johnny to go to sleep out of pure force of will.

"It's like you forget sometimes that I used to kick your ass," Johnny said. "Like I can't handle a few punches like you forget that I've handled several Mike Barnes in my life. I'm not made out of fine china."

"You got hit with a snowball and ran."

Johnny frowned. "Yeah but I don't think that'd happen again."

"Barnes is like an evil jack in the box, I never know when he's going to pop up and hurt someone I care about. There are no boundaries with him. I-Chozen held a knife to your neck and you shrugged it off like it was nothing. That was even with Chozen having boundaries. Everything steadily gets worse, Johnny. Kreese tried to kill you, Chozen tried to kill you, the pattern is that Barnes will try and kill you. With my luck, he's going to bring a gun."

"Chozen was using me to bait you."

"I know that."

"He explicitly told me it was all for show."

"Johnny don't tell me it didn't freak you out."

"It did. But Chozen isn't Kreese. Chozen apologized to me. Practically every time he saw me afterward. Kreese...I don't know is in Tahiti or something probably drinking Mai Tai's and getting massages. He probably hasn't given a thought to what he did. And I'm...I'm working on accepting that I probably won't-he'll never apologize to me. That was a *betrayal.* It's different Daniel. Barnes is no one to me. I don't give a shit about him, except that he's a pain in the ass and keeps hurting you and people I care about. You're not the only one who's allowed to be pissed about the situation. You're not alone. Just like you were worried about Chozen. I'm worried about Barnes. I don't like it. I don't like that he knows where we live or the shop or that he keeps finding you like he's tracking you. But if he comes after you while I'm around I'm going to punch him in the face and I will apologize to Mr. Miyagi about it later. I don't want to see you get hurt either okay?"

Daniel sighed pressing his face against Johnny's chest.

"Hey, don't bite me again."

"I won't," Daniel said with a laugh, though it was tempting.

He thought about what Johnny said, about the concern he always saw when he got hurt, while Johnny wordlessly bandaged up his hands and his feet, the bruises, and cuts. He thought about telling Johnny that Terry Silver had said Kreese was dead. That he wasn't sipping drinks in Tahiti, but Johnny probably wasn't ready to deal with that yet. He listened instead to Johnny's steady heartbeat, relaxing in his arms until his eyes shut and he fell asleep.

As October rolled around Daniel was pretty sure with Dutch's help he could break a man's bones with a well-sent punch and kick and he didn't like it.

But he'd take out that practice dummy next time he walked into the Cobra Kai dojo.

He was able to talk and run with Dutch and Jessica in the mornings without feeling like death was snapping at his heels. He felt stronger, almost like when he'd been in Okinawa, *better* than Okinawa.

He still didn't want to fight Barnes though.

He didn't want to kill anyone.

But he'd made himself into a weapon.

Coaxed there by Mr. Silver, polished by his own hard work.

He sparred with the guys on the weekends and it was fun. He was careful. He didn't want to hurt them, but it was good to practice strategy.

Ms. Lawrence and he had had brunch three times now. Now it was their fourth. He was telling her about Silver, about how he was training not just for the tournament but also to keep away others. She listened curiously and nodding.

She was easy to talk to. Even though it felt weird.

Was everything he was doing bad?

He thought Mr. Miyagi wouldn't approve.

But maybe she would.

"Sounds like Cobra Kai, but hopped up," she said thoughtfully sipping

on her bloody mary

Daniel chased around the eggs on his plate with his fork.

"Yeah," he said softly.

Was it? Was it just Kreese's Cobra Kai but with Terry Silver's spin on it?

Mr. Silver made it seem like he was helping.

Like he wanted Daniel to be able to defend himself in any situation.

He was taking time out of his schedule to help him.

Daniel wasn't paying him.

And it wasn't like weird teaching techniques hadn't gotten him far before. Mr. Miyagi's teaching methods were always indirect. And Daniel was now kicking through two by fours.

Mr. Miyagi could split a tree.

He was getting to the same point, just taking a different route there. Except maybe a bad way.

"What's his name again?" she asked.

"Terry Silver."

"Hmm," she said thoughtfully.

"What?" Daniel asked.

"He's teaching you?"

"Yeah."

"His name wasn't on the list of registered sensei's I got from the All-Valley last year."

"Oh, well he came from South Korea because, well we haven't proven this but he says Kreese is dead."

"What?" Ms. Lawrence asked setting her drink down.

"Bobby said not to tell Johnny until we've seen a death certificate, and the guys have been digging around, so we're not sure, but Mr. Silver is

teaching in the old dojo and I haven't seen him or heard from him...Johnny, he joked and said he's probably in Tahiti. But he's not around, so like maybe he did die?"

"Daniel, are you telling me your studying in the Cobra Kai dojo?"

"Well yeah. It hasn't been that *no mercy* stuff. Terry Silver has his own method. Quicksilver, he calls it."

"And what's that entail?"

Daniel repeated the three lessons of Quicksilver to her, about how to stop an opponent like Barnes. About how Mr. Silver would show him on the punching bag or something and then Daniel would do it on the practice dummy, made of wood, and how really he'd gotten much better at it, and could break through it, and yeah it did hurt, but...

Her hand shot out and held his.

"Daniel," she said softly. "That's not how you're supposed to learn karate."

"He's trying to help me," Daniel said.

"Daniel, I-I don't think he is. That sounds like Cobra Kai, they don't help. It sounds like another version of Kreese. Some of-" She frowned, but she didn't look away. "Some of Kreese's methods were similar. I found out when I did my digging on Kreese. He made the boys do all sorts of stuff with that same awful style of rhetoric. Break it down Daniel. He wants you to kill your opponents. Blinding someone with their own blood, that's no mercy. Breaking their legs, crushing their ribs, your striking hard and fast, and showing no mercy to your opponent. It's against the rules."

"Ms. Lawrence, he's the only one trying to stop Barnes. He's teaching me for free-"

"Daniel, there are good men in the Valley who expect nothing in return like Mr. Miyagi. And then there are bad men in the Valley who use it as a trap. You will be like the mouse Kreese gave all the kids-"

Daniel felt his heart pound. "The-the mouse?"

She nodded. "He gave all the kids a pet mouse, and then as soon as they got them attached to their little furry friend he fed it to a snake."

"Are you saying he's teaching me how to win while also making me a mouse?"

She sighed. "I think he's trying to mess with your head, Daniel. I've fallen into that type of trap myself. Things seem good, but then they fly off the handle over the slightest thing. If you're not perfect, suddenly they're pissed. So you start working extra hard to get better because you disappointed them and it's got to be you right? You end up overdoing it, overworking, trying too hard at something you're not interested in because you want to make it up to them. You want that praise again. Daniel, it's manipulative. And it's quicksand. You don't realize it until it's too late. And you know what another type of quicksilver is?"

Daniel's mouth felt dry, remembering the times Mr. Silver flew off the handle.

How he thought it was his fault.

She couldn't be right, could she?

He shook his head.

"Quicksilver is another word for mercury. Mercury, it's a metal that acts as a liquid and it poisons people. Causes mood swings, bouts of anger, nervousness, irritability, anxiety. Daniel honey, I think he's poisoning you slowly. Maybe I'm wrong, but if I'm not then you're in danger and you got to get out."

Daniel chewed on his lip. If she was right, if he'd been played, if this had all been a big scheme, why? Why would Silver do that?

He thought about mercury from science class, the class he'd had with Johnny. Their teacher had done a whole lesson on it. And it was...apt.

Mr. Silver was smooth.

But she was right it was incredibly toxic and if he'd been teaching Daniel Cobra Kai with ulterior motives...he couldn't have been.

But Johnny had been stuck in Kreese's trap for years.

Ms. Lawrence had been trapped in Sid's.

If anyone could spot another trap or another person stuck...no.

He couldn't be.

Why would Silver hate him?

He didn't even know the guy.

It didn't make sense.

"I'll be careful Ms. Lawrence, thank you. I'll uh, think about it."

She gave him that look.

That look his own mother gave him.

Full of concern but out of ways to try and persuade him.

He'd be careful.

She'd given him things to look out for.

Her hand suddenly grabbed his again and she held it tight, eyes hard, full of warning.

"Just know, if a grown-ass man is yelling at you, it's not you. Nothing is your fault. There's something wrong with him. And you put yourself first. Hell, a grown-ass woman does it, it's not you. Your still a kid. Yeah, you're 18, but they have no right, and this man, this Silver has no right to be teaching you this way. You shouldn't be hurting yourself to learn. If the goal was to break two by fours he would've started you off on something softer, easier, attainable. Okay, Daniel? He yells at you, it's not you. There's something wrong. When you're in a field of poppies all the red flags look like flowers. Okay?"

Daniel frowned. He'd have to look at Johnny's book for that one. He had a bad feeling about the metaphor she'd just used, it was in her tone, but he got what she meant and he felt better.

"Thanks, Ms. Lawrence," Daniel said softly playing with a packet of sugar on their table with his free hand.

It's a little embarrassing how he could tell how pissed off she was on his behalf.

Like if Terry Silver showed up and Daniel tried to introduce them she start smacking him with her purse or her fist.

It was an assumption actually.

He had no clue how she'd handle a fight.

But it was that mother bear instinct he'd seen in her with Johnny and it was touching that she was so worried about him. That she'd go to bat for him too.

She didn't let go of his hand and grabbed her fork with her other hand and stabbed at her pancakes angrily.

Daniel who always was a little nervous to meet her realized he was so glad he did. So glad she was in his life. Because maybe she was wrong. But the fact she cared enough to get pissed on his behalf. That he knew she was meeting with him so frequently because his own mom was across the country, it hurt his heart, it was bittersweet.

Her and Johnny had been through so much, and here she was holding his hand, taking care of him, not letting him slip through the cracks while his mother was gone.

Making sure he was eating, making sure he was taking care of himself, staying safe.

He was pretty sure she reported back to his mother. Because sometimes when he called his Mom she knew things he'd told Ms. Lawrence. And it didn't upset him.

But it was love.

A different kind of love.

But it was still love.

She cared about him.

Didn't want him getting hurt.

Didn't want some stranger manipulating him. And it wasn't just because he was dating Johnny.

Dutch had quietly mentioned that she came by sometimes now, dropped off food at his house like she was trying to get rid of it, like she was drowning in tamales and other things, but he'd said he had a feeling she was checking on him.

Like now that she had all this free time on her hands, now that she was free, she'd adopted him as one of her kids.

Dutch had run a hand through his hair awkwardly, telling Daniel it was kind of nice.

She was like Johnny.

Different but you could tell where he got it from.

It felt like that.

Like she'd adopted him into her group of kids she was keeping an eye on.

And while Daniel was 18, while his ID made him feel like an adult, while he was figuring out a business, while he was doing all this adult stuff, he still felt lost at sea.

Lost out in the world.

And sometimes he wished his mom was there. That he could just go to South Seas and up to apartment 20 and ask her:

"Hey Ma, how do I get my shirts ironed the way you do it?"

Or the millions of other things he'd realized he hadn't asked her to teach him before he'd gone for Okinawa.

He didn't know which soap she used, how she cleaned the caulk in the bathroom so it stayed bright.

How did she know which store sold the best clothes?

How she got things on sale all the time?

How she found the things he liked?

Ms. Lawrence wasn't his mom.

No one could ever replace her.

But it was like a band-aid.

A gentle blanket placed over his shoulders and the promise that they'd wait through the long night until she got back together.

His eyes pricked with tears and he blinked looking up at the weird twisty lights the brunch spot they were trying out had.

She'd think he was upset about Silver.

Not that he was homesick for his mother, for her home cooking, for

the dishes she made that he just couldn't get right and she couldn't tell him how to fix it over the phone. What trick she did that made it just right.

Daniel got a hold of himself, bundling the homesick feeling he was all too familiar with up to enjoy the moment, to spend time with Ms. Lawrence who was telling him she was thinking of making her divorce party, something the guys are adamant she still had, and her belated housewarming party rolled up into a Halloween party.

"Three in one," she said with a laugh. "Everyone can come in costume."

Daniel smiled, it sounds fun, better than last year.

Though that bar is so damn low.

Johnny shoved it straight into the dirt.

But now, maybe they could dress up together.

A dorky couple's outfit.

He wondered if he could get Johnny interested in that.

There were plenty of movies they could dress up as.

But not a lot that were couples, that wouldn't be weird.

Maybe they could be something else.

Definitely not ghoulish skeletons.

Never again.

That would be something to look forward to while he tried to think of what to do about Silver, about what to do about the tournament and Barnes and all the big things he kept trying to shove away into the back of his mind.

After brunch came to an end she gave him a big warm hug and kissed his cheek before heading off to her car and Daniel drove home to Mr. Miyagi's.

Johnny was in the garden doing kata.

He'd gotten up early to go to the sanctuary and he had a band-aid on

his hand.

"What happened?" Daniel asked voice tight with worry.

"Cat," Johnny said after following Daniel's gaze to his palm.

"How's my mom?" Johnny asked.

"Good, start thinking of a good nonskeleton Halloween costume. We can dress up together."

Johnny blinked then looked thoughtful like he was going to think about it very seriously.

"Hey, where's your book on flowers?" Daniel asked taking off his shoes and walking towards their room.

"On the desk."

Daniel picked up the well-worn book and flipped it to the index, then flipped back to poppies.

When you're in a field of poppies all the red flags look like flowers.

He looked at the picture of a red flower.

Death. Greek and Roman offering to the dead.

Daniel sunk down into the chair. Did she seriously think Silver was *that* bad?

If an enemy can't stand, he can't fight.

If an enemy can't see, he can't fight.

If an enemy can't breathe, he can't fight.

Daniel shuddered.

Balance

Chapter Notes

> Moved something from the mysterious time between TKK3 and Cobra Kai here.

Daniel was sitting out on the wooden platform looking at the garden.

They'd had dinner with Mr. Miyagi and he'd gone to bed.

Johnny held a jar out to Daniel.

Daniel blinked surprised at the item suddenly thrust in front of his face and looked up at Johnny.

"Pick something," Johnny said. "Tomorrow morning let's go on a date."

Daniel took the jar in both hands and stared at it.

Johnny felt antsy.

He didn't like that Daniel was hurt and not telling him who did it.

He didn't like that his own mother was technically going on more dates with his boyfriend than he was.

Hell, Ali had come up and picked up Daniel for brunch.

Their ex got more dates lately than he did.

"Aren't the guys coming up?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah but I told them to find something else to do in the morning."

Daniel carefully opened the jar and pulled out a folded-up piece of paper, handing the jar back to Johnny.

Johnny needed to get out.

He needed a change from the everyday.

There was too much going on.

Too much pressure.

Too many people.

He had time with Daniel, alone with him in their room, sometimes in the shop when it wasn't busy, but it wasn't the same.

All their free time had turned into emergency preparation mode.

Enemies on every front.

It was like the nightmare Kreese had drilled into him and he needed a break.

He needed to do something fun.

Something calming.

Something alone with his boyfriend to let off steam.

Daniel unfurled the piece of paper and squinted at it in the lantern light of the garden.

"Bike riding," he read.

Perfect.

Daniel tapped the piece of paper against his lips thoughtfully. A mischievous look in his eyes.

Johnny waited, putting the lid back onto the jar.

"Let's make it *interesting*," Daniel says.

"Won't it already be interesting?" Johnny asked. "I figure you'll have plenty to do trying to keep up with me."

Daniel grinned, shifting and turning to him. His finger poking Johnny in the chest. "Let's race hotshot, winner gets a prize."

"What kind of prize?" Johnny asked.

Daniel was biting his lip.

Nothing good.

Everything good.

He was about to agree to something incredibly stupid because he couldn't refuse Daniel.

Because Daniel had great ideas even if sometimes they sounded stupid at first.

Awful.

Embarrassing.

God, he was going to recommend the loser run through a field naked or something.

"Whatever the other wants," Daniel said lowly.

That was a threat.

A promise.

Johnny's heart pounded.

He never wanted to both win and lose at something so badly.

"Yeah?" Johnny asked leaning close. "Don't want to put some ground rules down huh?"

"I already know what I want, *when I win.*"

"Oh, you're so sure you'll win?" Johnny asked.

"Of course I am," Daniel said with a grin. "And you can just enjoy the view on the way."

Johnny laughed. "I like your confidence Daniel, but you've forgotten how fast I am."

"Yeah, *running*," Daniel scoffed. "Not on a bike."

"You think you've got a fighting chance?"

"I *know* I've not *only* got a fighting chance but I'm going to *win*."

"So why don't you just tell me what you want now then?"

"Because I want to tell you when you lose, or when I want to," Daniel said with a grin, turning and kissing him, a quick mischievous kiss before getting up. "Now let's get our sleep huh? If we're going to race, if I'm going to beat you I want to get a good night's sleep ahead of time."

Daniel was stretching.

Johnny was going to make him mad.

He was going to do it.

He got up, keeping low, picking Daniel up over his shoulder.

A quick easy move and Daniel yelped in surprise.

"Johnny! Put me down!"

"You looked tired," Johnny said innocently, arm around the back of Daniel's thighs.

He'd behave.

Even if he knew Daniel wouldn't have.

Just a little.

"Figured I'd be helpful."

Daniel was prodding at his back, trying to figure out a way to safely get out of Johnny's arms without sending them both tumbling to the ground.

Johnny carefully shifted, leaning down and to the side to grab the date jar he'd set down.

When he stood back up Daniel pushed himself up looking at him, hands digging into Johnny's shoulder.

"When you offered to carry me around because of my knee, was this what you had in planned?" Daniel asked.

"Something like this," Johnny said, walking to their room, and pushing the door open with his shoulder, stepping carefully through, ducking to be careful of Daniel's head since he was being stubborn and refusing to just relax.

Because Johnny didn't think Daniel knew *how* to relax.

For a guy who meditated a lot, he did not chill.

"Got it out of your system yet?" Daniel asked sourly.

Johnny set the date jar on the desk.

"Actually I'm lamenting I hadn't done this from the start."

He felt Daniel stiffen.

"What does that mean?"

Johnny grinned, let Daniel stew over what he meant for a while.

Let *his* mind run wild for once.

Though.

Maybe that wasn't fair. Daniel's mind always ran wild.

Constantly wild.

"Sure you don't want to tell me your hopeful prize?" Johnny asked.

"You gotta wait."

Johnny could practically hear the look on his face. Petulant. Stubborn.

Johnny walked to the bed and put his free hand on Daniel's back.

He knew Daniel wasn't too miffed.

That it was all airs.

All play. Just like him.

He squeezed Daniel's thigh, let his hand go up a bit.

"I see," Johnny said thoughtfully. "That's how it is hmm?"

Daniel squirmed.

Johnny shifted forward, to lower Daniel down onto the bed, hand purposefully on his ass.

It seemed innocent like he was helping make sure he didn't fall, wasn't just dumping Daniel onto the bed, just gently laying him down, but it was sneaky.

He looked at Daniel who was frowning still.

Eyes on him.

Seeing through him.

"You are not going to distract me from winning in the morning," Daniel said.

Stubborn. So damn stubborn.

"Who said I was trying to distract you?" Johnny asked feigning ignorance and confusion.

Daniel huffed and pulled Johnny down into a kiss that almost promised more.

Almost.

"After I leave you in my dust," Daniel promised with a playful grin and Johnny sighed as Daniel wiggled out of his arms to get ready for bed.

They got up early and took the truck.

Mr. Miyagi said they could after they'd both stared at their cars unable to decide which one could hold both of their bikes.

Johnny felt bad at the thought of leaving Mr. Miyagi without his truck, but he looked at all the cars in the lot and reminded himself that Mr. Miyagi wouldn't be without transportation.

Johnny wanted to bike in Angeles National Park.

It wouldn't be a quick trip.

It was nearly a half-hour out, but he'd biked Cogswell Dam before and he liked it, and it was nicely shaded and he wanted to show it to Daniel.

Plus he had an unfair advantage for winning.

Because he knew the trail.

Daniel had tried to drive but Johnny had asked Daniel if he knew any good spots to ride.

He was met with a petulant silence as Daniel got into the other side of the cab, as he flicked on the radio, playing with it as Johnny drove.

"Thought you were going to spend the whole drive over telling me how you were going to win," Johnny said driving them out of Reseda.

"I *am* going to win," Daniel said.

Johnny smiled.

He was so confident.

So sure of himself.

Maybe he knew something Johnny didn't. And then Johnny remembered that bike in the back was the one Daniel had been on that one night, driving him off the road and down the hill.

He was lucky, so damn lucky that he hadn't killed Daniel multiple times.

That Daniel sat next to him without fear.

Without concern for being by his side.

Wanted to be next to him.

A hand was on his thigh and he glanced over, a quick glance to see Daniel watching him, those big brown eyes dark.

"Are you trying to distract me so I won't win?" Johnny asked amused.

"Is it working?"

"You'll have to try harder than that," Johnny said with a laugh.

"That can be arranged."

"We will die, don't you dare," Johnny said quickly as Daniel's hand moved between his legs.

Heart pounding hard.

"Sure you can't multitask?" Daniel asked.

"Daniel, I will lose focus and I will crash Mr. Miyagi's car and we will die. You are too distracting."

"Too distracting huh?" Daniel said pulling his hand back with a dramatic sigh. "Maybe if you let me drive I could show you how good

I am at multitasking."

"Do you want to go bike riding or not?" Johnny asked.

Maybe he'd let Daniel drive them home, learn whatever that meant.

No. This was Mr. Miyagi's truck.

Boundaries had to be set.

Why did Johnny have to be the responsible one?

Daniel gave a little pout sinking into his seat.

"Yes."

"Save that energy for trying to win," Johnny said.

"I will win."

Maybe he would.

Johnny hadn't ridden a bike in a while, not one you had to pedal.

But he was still going to pretend he had a chance.

Still, bicker right back, self-assured.

After their race, Johnny and Daniel went home.

Daniel won just barely. And he was refusing to tell Johnny what he wanted for the win.

It's frustrating.

But he's smiling so damn brightly that Johnny hadn't taken off his sunglasses and it was worth it.

He could keep being a pain about it, but sometime, eventually, Daniel would tell him.

Plus Johnny had to admit he's looking forward to the surprise.

And at least Daniel had kept his hands to himself on the ride home, too excited about winning, chattering the whole way home.

The guy's cars were in the lot.

And he looked around for them.

Mr. Miyagi was making his iced green tea and carrying it out on a platter towards the garden greeting them on his way.

Johnny stopped on the steps to the backyard.

There was a big hole in the yard.

The guys were digging a hole.

A big ass hole in the garden.

"What are you doing?"

Daniel had beelined straight for a shower, whistling happily but hearing Johnny he turned and came out to see the hole in the garden.

"Boys build pond."

"A pond Mr. Miyagi? That's pretty cool! Going to get some koi fish or something? Lotus?" Daniel asked leaning against Johnny, hand running along his back.

"Okay, Mr. Miyagi we think this step is done, wanna take a look?" Bobby asked crawling out of the hole.

He was covered in dirt from head to toe.

He was sweaty and his hair was plastered to his forehead.

The other guys scrambled out in the same state.

"You might not get your shower," Johnny said softly. "Unless you hurry."

"We can just hose them off right?" Daniel whispered back.

"They will track mud in and if you spray them down I am not cleaning up the mud,"

Daniel heaved a sigh.

"Fine. You're no fun."

"Excuse you, I'm a lot of fun," Johnny said in mock offense.

Daniel leaned up and kissed him on the cheek.

"If we had our own place, we'd just shower together," he said, squeezing Johnny's ass and before spinning on his heels, continuing his whistle towards the bathroom.

Johnny thought he'd been cool, but somehow Daniel always figure out how to find his weak spot, to surprise him and he knew he was bright red as he looked out at the guys.

When he managed to calm down he offered to help.

He asked Mr. Miyagi if any help was needed but the guys and Mr. Miyagi told him no.

So Johnny sat with his book and read until Daniel finished his shower.

"They don't want help?" Daniel asked, drying off his hair.

"Nope."

"Let's make pie then," Daniel said holding out a hand.

He'd dressed already in those shorts he liked that seemed too short and one of his jersey shirts that if Daniel lifted his arms showed skin that Johnny always wanted to touch.

He took Daniel's hand, following him to the kitchen as he got out the ingredients, the stuff from Daniel's mother that they hadn't gotten around to yet.

Daniel talked to him softly, talking about his mother's famous pies, about the family competitions, the orchard competitions, the blue ribbons his mother had.

He sounded so proud, knowing what he was doing was going to be delicious.

A nice treat they could share with the guys who were...using power tools, that seemed like a bad combo.

But Mr. Miyagi was watching them, guiding them so he doubted there'd be a trip to the emergency room.

Or at least he hoped not.

The pie turned out good.

Smelled amazing and Daniel gave him a look like *was there any doubt?*

And no, there wasn't but, he still was pleasantly excited, looked forward to a taste of their hard work.

They let it cool which was like torture.

Daniel kept swatting at his hands, kept taking them both in his.

Torture.

Absolute torture.

Everything about the day, the night before, was torture.

If Johnny couldn't enjoy Daniel he wanted to enjoy his cooking at least for the moment.

If he couldn't learn what diabolical wish was bouncing around in his head then at least let him enjoy a slice of pie that he helped make.

"You will burn the roof of your mouth and your tongue, and I like that tongue," Daniel said pointedly.

Johnny sighed, he wiggled his hands out of Daniels and pulled him close, breathing him in.

He wanted something.

Anything at this point.

"Can I get a kiss then, at least?" It came out a little whinier than he meant, a little desperate for something.

Daniel pulled away blinking up at him in surprise than a tender warmth spreading across his face.

"Of course Johnny," he said pushing himself up as Johnny leaned down, kissing him in Miyagi's kitchen.

So soft and gentle, warm, a solace for a second-place win. Another to add to the list.

A salve on the itchy feeling Johnny had. Antsy.

Like he needed to get out, to go for a long ride somewhere.

Like he needed something but didn't know what it was, but this, this was helping, the way Daniel slid his fingers into his hair, the side of his face, delving deeper into that kiss.

They needed their own place. Johnny wanted to scoop Daniel up, set him on the counter. But it wasn't their counter.

They ate breakfast there with Mr. Miyagi.

Maybe if he got them a hotel room or something, the expensive kind with the fluffy robes.

Maybe that'd be nicer.

But it still wouldn't be theirs.

Maybe he'd have to start looking.

Casually keeping an eye out for something.

For when Daniel was ready to leave Mr. Miyagi's place.

What if that was never?

He wanted to laugh.

Daniel complained about the lack of privacy in every line of how he held himself whenever they were interrupted.

In that way, Daniel couldn't keep his hands off of him when they were alone even for a moment. Like in the truck.

Daniel pulled away with a sigh like Johnny had been the one to pull away. Like he regretted it, even though he'd been the one to do end it.

Johnny could do this all day, find some quiet spot and just kiss all day, all afternoon.

Who needed food or water if he could just kiss Daniel?

Okay, he knew he'd need food and water. But, still.

"Come out here and check it out!" Johnny heard Tommy's call and he turned heading out to the garden.

The hole in the yard was full of water and a polished piece of wood floating in it. A big circle.

"What did you guys make?" Daniel asked stepping forward, curious.

"Balance wheel," Mr. Miyagi said nodding his head with approval. "For moving in sync with another. Friend. Each move must be the same and equal, must reach balance with another. Without seeing other. Learn to read."

"That sounds difficult," Daniel said.

"And hilarious," Dutch said with a grin. "If you fail you fall into the water."

"Boys try," Mr. Miyagi said motioning towards it.

"I want to try," Tommy said scrambling up and towards the water.

"You know what, me too," Dutch said following him to the other side.

It took them a while to try and get up onto the wheel.

If they didn't try and climb up at the same time then the other would sink into the water.

They kept failing. Sinking into the water.

But they eventually get onto the balance wheel.

Kreese never taught them anything like it so they just moved awkwardly in a circle until Tommy got a look on his face and jumped. Both of them splashed into the pond and Dutch spluttered and Tommy laughed until Dutch caught him and shoved him back under. Just one push and then he let go, frustration without danger. Playful.

"Johnny try," Mr. Miyagi said motioning to the wheel.

Johnny blinked, and carefully walked out to the water.

It was cool, which was refreshing after a day of biking and baking pie in the kitchen and the hot air of LA.

He waited, and Bobby waded out looking confident.

They put their hands on the wheel at the same time and push themselves up.

They managed to keep it from bucking them.

They stood across from each other while Johnny tried to think of what they could do.

Kreese didn't teach kata, and it was built for kata.

There was a look in Bobby's eye and Johnny inwardly groaned.

So dorky.

He rose his arms like Bobby.

His family and their love for Madonna music.

It was because his parents liked it.

And his little siblings liked it.

Johnny was used to the Madonna dance parties.

Embarrassing.

To be fair though it was mostly a lot of arm movements, not a lot of moving around the wheel.

So it was probably the easiest move that could be done on the wheel.

But Johnny was pretty sure the point was to do kata.

To move in tandem around the circle.

Which he guessed they were doing.

Kind of.

They stayed up longer than Dutch or Tommy and got back down carefully of their own volition.

They broke for lunch and tried the pie.

It was as delicious Johnny thought it would be. Watching as Daniel preened over all the compliments.

Then they tried again.

The dancing had led to an idea for the guys and they tried dancing.

They didn't fall in as often, but it wasn't easy.

Popular dances they knew.

Then Daniel was tugging him back towards the water.

Kata.

It wouldn't be easy, watching each other, and trying to read the other's moves.

"Atatatata," Mr. Miyagi said. "Back to back."

"We won't be able to see each other then Mr. Miyagi," Daniel said turning to him.

Mr. Miyagi nodded.

"Yes, must *sense*, feel."

Johnny looked at Daniel.

He was up for the challenge and after a moment's hesitation, it seemed like Daniel was too, or preparing to fall into the water.

They turned carefully, it was harder to move at the same time unable to see him.

But they managed it for a few steps before falling in.

Daniel popped up quickly, eyes wide, turning to Johnny.

"Let's try that again," Daniel said.

That look of stubborn determination in his eyes.

Johnny got it.

It had felt like there had to be a trick to it.

He wanted to try it again.

They fell in the water five more times and were soaked by the sixth, but they managed to complete the whole kata routine that Mr. Miyagi had taught them with grim determination, back to back on the balance wheel.

They fell in only because of the excitement at getting it right.

They'd spun to face one another and slipped right back into the water.

"Shit, that was great," Dutch said.

"Should we clap?" Tommy asked.

"Golf clap of course," Jimmy said.

"I'd say 7 out of 10 since they didn't stick the landing," Bobby said in his most obnoxious faux posh voice, matching the guys.

A polite round of claps rose up from the guys sitting in the garden.

Mr. Miyagi was smiling, looking at them all fondly and shaking his head before going to get towels.

Johnny looked at Daniel smiling warmly.

It was like a new challenge, a new goal, to get better, to get perfect at it.

And he knew from the look in Daniel's eyes that they would perfect it.

There was no doubt about it.

A Broken Curse

Chapter Notes

Kind of moved something in TKK3 up to this chapter.

They were taking Jessica out dancing.

All the guys were in town and Daniel recommended they go dancing so that the club for her going away party wasn't the *only* time they took her dancing.

Plus he liked dancing.

He missed being in a crowd surrounded by bodies.

Yeah, maybe it'd be a bit weird to have one girl and six guys walking into a club. And Daniel wasn't sure if it was a club that would be chill about him dancing with his boyfriend.

But Jessica looked absolutely delighted.

They were walking down the steps into the club that Dutch had picked out and Daniel was telling Jessica about how much wood he could kick through now because of Dutch's help.

They'd dressed up a bit and Daniel was focusing on talking to Jessica because it was unfair.

Unfair that he couldn't dance with Johnny because Johnny looked nice.

He always cleaned up nice and dirtied nice and just always looked hot.

He thought he'd get immune to it at some point.

But not yet it seemed.

He hadn't seen the white suit, it looked like a beach outfit, casual but dressy, a pop of color under the blazer, almost turquoise that made his eyes pop.

It looked familiar but he couldn't place it.

He knew if he pulled away with Johnny, found some little dark corner to dance with him that the guys would keep an eye on Jessica.

She wouldn't miss them.

But he'd still feel bad.

It'd been *his* idea and he planned to have his first dance with her.

Dance till it was time to get a drink.

Which meant Johnny would hang out with the guys.

Would he dance with someone else?

Would he just sit in a corner drinking a beer or something else?

Jessica grabbed his hand and pulled him out to the dance floor and he looked back at Johnny whose eyes were on him.

He felt like he was in Okinawa again all of a sudden.

Jessica didn't dance the same as Kumiko.

Kumiko was a dancer.

But it was still fun and Jessica was smiling and it was infectious.

And he was showing off a little bit because he knew Johnny was watching.

After a few songs, they broke to get a drink and Dutch was there grinning asking if they'd had fun. If Jessica really thought she could survive of a night of dancing with six boys.

She laughed like it was a challenge. Like there was no way she wouldn't.

"Let me just get a drink," she said. "You volunteering to dance next?"

"Maybe," Dutch said with a grin.

Mr. Silver was there suddenly talking to Daniel, telling him that Daniel had told him he was going to be there.

But Daniel remembered *not* telling him.

Because Ms. Lawrence had made him nervous.

He remembered specifically avoiding telling Mr. Silver where he was going or his plans, being flippant about where he'd go after their lessons, or his weekend plans that Mr. Silver always asked about. Trying to get a little more distance between them just in case her worries were valid.

And they'd made this choice last minute.

Dutch had picked the club, not Daniel.

He hadn't known where they were even going until that night.

Until Dutch had parked the van out front.

Then Mr. Silver was asking who his friend was, slipping past what had to have been a lie, but why he was lying Daniel didn't know.

It reminded him of what Dutch had said, that Mr. Silver lied through his teeth and about the weirdest things, things that didn't make sense.

Like he was trying to get Daniel to question things Daniel knew for certain like he knew Mr. Silver had said he'd come off a plane from Korea, had said he'd studied there, but didn't know basic Korean.

Like he knew Mr. Silver knew about the All-Valley but suddenly didn't.

Like he knew he *hadn't* told Mr. Silver he was going out with Jessica dancing at this club, because Daniel hadn't known he was going to this club.

It was confusing.

The other ones he could chalk up to Mr. Silver grieving the loss of a friend, of being busy and trying to clean up an overwhelmingly large mess.

He knew he and his Ma were wrecked after his dad died and he knew they forgot stuff, that things slipped their mind.

But they hadn't become mind readers, that...that felt like a stalker.

And the hand that had been on his back felt a little too familiar, a little too much of a coincidence to be okay for a guy who just sometimes let him borrow his dojo to practice. Who offered to teach him Cobra Kai so he could win.

Daniel felt a little sick, stumbling over his words with Mr. Silver and turning to Jessica to see what Mr. Silver had meant.

Had his smile always looked so creepy?

Had it always never met his eyes?

When Daniel had run into Johnny and the guys it was because of shared locations.

It was always because of school or just bad luck, or because he hadn't known it was a popular hang out for the kids from school.

Chozen was also bad luck, it'd been a small village or he'd been spotted by one of his cronies who'd left to get Chozen. Because they'd talked about that before he left Okinawa.

Daniel had demanded to know how he always found Daniel and his friends and Chozen had told him that his friends always spotted him.

That the people he knew spotted him and then would come to get him.

Like when he'd cut through the ice, he'd been just across the street at the dojo, had just finished work and they'd come to get him to tell him that Daniel was in the betting bar with the ice.

Because Johnny was easy to spot from a distance and he'd told them to keep an eye out for Johnny.

It was always quick for them to see Johnny and then glance around and see Daniel was with him.

Daniel had asked if Chozen bothered Johnny when Daniel wasn't around, and Chozen had shoved his hands in his pockets and looked away, *Wouldn't you?*

Daniel had spat back that it was his boyfriend so of course.

That had riled Chozen up again and he had to take a deep breath.

Muttering how they hadn't been dating when they arrived and with an annoying punk like Daniel it might not last, a roll of his eyes and shaking his head before getting himself under control again like he had to remind himself that he wasn't fighting Daniel again.

That he'd promised his uncle he'd stop.

The dance had been a coincidence.

He'd gone to blow off steam from losing.

It'd been bad luck.

And seeing Johnny had been fun, a nice highlight, but then he realized that Daniel was probably around too and he could get his money back, make his night better.

But instead, he got punched in the dick.

In the end, Chozen had apologized, hand running through his hair and looking awkwardly off to the side like he couldn't meet Daniel's eyes, kicking at a rock nearby.

Petulant like a toddler who was forced to say sorry.

It'd been one of the first times he apologized, he'd gotten better at it as they went along through the rest of the summer.

Especially if Johnny was around or Mr. Miyagi.

But this. This was planned.

Why would he have said Daniel had told him?

Why not have said that he just happened to be in the neighborhood?

Why not say it was a coincidence?

Why not tell Daniel that he'd just happened to see him and wanted to say hi?

Why make Daniel question what he'd said?

Like yeah Daniel spoke a lot, and maybe that would've worked, he would've thought he'd mentioned it at some point if Dutch hadn't made the whole thing a big surprise.

Not telling them where they were going when he picked them up in his van.

It'd been a surprise to him too.

Mr. Silver had to have followed them.

Which didn't make sense.

Why would he follow Daniel?

To make sure Daniel wasn't just fooling around and was still serious about studying for the tournament?

Was it like Daniel was some investment that Mr. Silver had to keep an eye on?

But how?

Why?

Was Daniel his *only* student?

Was he worried that Daniel would leave like all the students had left Kreese?

He thought he'd made sure it was understood that this was a temporary thing, that he was grateful but he wasn't going to ever stay at Cobra Kai forever.

Mr. Silver would have to make other friends, get other students.

Like maybe Daniel would gift him a bonsai as thanks, but now his blood was screaming to run, to cut ties ASAP, but he'd have to figure out how to do it gently, explain that Daniel already had a teacher and competitions and tournaments weren't really his thing anyway, champion or not, but Mr. Silver would be okay, he'd get other students.

Maybe.

Or he could do something else.

Like go back to Korea and continue whatever peaceful life he lived there. Or didn't live there.

Daniel was starting to doubt anything Mr. Silver had told him.

A guy tried to throw an arm around Jessica's shoulder but Dutch moved in first.

Blocking and not letting him through.

A dark look in his eyes that Daniel hadn't seen since before they were

friends.

The guy looked startled at the wolfish grin that spelled wild danger and ran off.

"Your *boyfriend* Danny-boy?" Mr. Silver asked.

Dutch? Daniel opened his mouth, smiling about to laugh and explain no that he was a close friend but then Dutch was there, arm around Daniel's waist.

He'd whispered something to Jessica and she was heading off to find their group.

"One of them, Daniel here has, oh man I've lost count honey, six boyfriends and I think three girlfriends."

Six? What was Dutch doing?

He was grinning but that dark look in his eyes hadn't left.

The wild one from when they used to fight.

When they hadn't been friends.

Full of threat, practically feral.

They'd been walking through the crowd and had stopped near a wall, a pillar in the room.

Mr. Silver looked a little stunned.

Like he was about to laugh and say it was a joke right?

But Dutch let go of Daniel's side and walked up close to Mr. Silver and kicked up his leg, the high way he did for Taekwondo, against the wall, showing off, all up in Mr. Silver's space.

Even though the guy was a giant he stumbled back a little in surprise.

"Sorry man, you're a little too old for him though. He's arguably the most popular date in the Valley. Goes into a dojo and leaves with numbers, dates. And they're *fun* dates. But he doesn't date anyone over the age of 21 or anyone under 17."

The guy who'd tried to touch Jessica came back and hovered awkwardly. Like he needed to ask something like he had unfinished

business and was looking awkwardly at Mr. Silver.

Mr. Silvers face was contorted, he looked angry, lips curling into a sneer.

Dutch looked at the guy hovering, casual, and at ease.

"Hey man, how old are you?"

"20."

"Daniel, want to add him to your date roster?"

"I think it's full at the moment," Daniel said stunned at what was happening.

"Sorry bud," Dutch said, backing away and bringing his leg back down. He shrugged and turned back to Mr. Silver patting his chest. "Good luck man, maybe try finding someone else your own age. What are you 50? There's a bingo hall across the street. Heard good things from my teachers. You can win a king-size candy bar there."

Dutch turned, arm wrapping back around Daniel's waist so easily. "Come on honey, let's go see your other boyfriends. We've been gone too long they'll get jealous."

Dutch waved flippantly at Mr. Silver, guiding Daniel through the crowd.

He was grinning, glanced back and Daniel felt lips on the top of his head.

"What are you doing?"

"Pissing that guy off," Dutch said warmly.

Daniel swatted at him gently, realizing Dutch was flipping Mr. Silver off.

Dutch laughed warmly, but Daniel's heart was panicking.

Dutch had made it seem like Daniel was like some pimp or something.

Now how was he going to explain this?

"You know if he sticks around," Dutch said, "You could have the other guys dance with you. It'll drive it home for sure. And they'd get a kick

out of it. You could dance as much as Jessica."

Daniel wrinkled his nose.

"You sure that's not going to start a fight? Like if we're going to dance won't someone try and start something?"

"You do realize I picked a club near West Hollywood for a reason right? This ain't a gay club, but it's pretty chill, and the bouncers have a zero fight tolerance with people trying to start shit. There's no way I'd let us go somewhere dancing where you and Johnny can't safely dance."

"Seriously?" Daniel asked.

"Hey, I take my fairy godparent responsibilities seriously man. I know how much you wanted to dance at prom. I saw the damn look you gave Johnny, and Ali told me," Dutch said letting go of him as they neared their group.

Johnny was sitting at a table, his back was to them.

Jessica and Bobby were arguing about pie.

Daniel leaned over Johnny, gently putting his hands on his shoulders and gently dragging them down to wrap his arms around him.

"Have fun dancing?" Johnny asked, tilting his head back to look at Daniel while Dutch told them about the fun he'd had.

Interrupting the pie argument that Daniel only caught the end of.

"We'll just have to bake our pies and compare them," Jessica said.

"You're on," Bobby said holding out his hand.

She took his hand and shook it.

"Yes," Daniel said softly in his ear, glancing at the table to look for Johnny's drink.

He picked it up and took a sip.

Boring old ice water.

For who Daniel had once thought of as an ace degenerate Johnny sure didn't drink as much as Daniel would've expected.

"Water?" Daniel asked amused.

"It's better if your dancing."

"Who even are you?"

"I'm trying to be the responsible one."

"Are you *always* the responsible one?" Daniel asked with a soft laugh.

"With these idiots?" Johnny asked waving his hand. "I'm like the temperature check. If I start drinking they start drinking. If I stick to water then maybe they drink, but it won't become a thing."

"A thing?" Daniel asked setting the cup back.

"Dutch stripping and challenging the biggest bouncer to an arm wrestle. Or heck, the poor bartender."

"Yeah that won't do, he told someone he's my date."

"Dutch?"

"Yup."

Daniel watched him, for a spark of jealousy. But it wasn't not there, he just looked curious and amused.

"And?"

Oh this bastard, he was going to dance with every other ex-cobra and make Johnny wait.

Maybe flirt up a stranger to add to his roster.

Make Dutch's joke a reality.

See if that stirred up his blood.

He pushed himself up and gave Johnny's shoulders a pat.

"Okay, I'm heading back to the dance floor, who wants to dance?" Daniel asked looking at the guys.

Johnny stood up so suddenly that Daniel had to step back to avoid him, but then the arm wrapped around his waist and pulled him close.

Daniel looked up into those blue eyes and swallowed hard.

"I do," Johnny said.

All resolve to tease fled.

All jokes of dancing with the guys to rile Johnny up faded.

His heart pounded hard in his ears and he followed Johnny out to the dance floor.

Johnny didn't even head to a dark corner like Daniel expected. Like Daniel would've picked. Right into the center, into the crowd.

It was something Daniel had been itching to do since before prom, something they didn't get to do.

They danced sometimes in their room. Not as often as Daniel would've liked. There was a lot that they just didn't do out of respect for Mr. Miyagi. They didn't want to be too loud too late. Or too early.

Daniel liked loud music, the kind you could feel in your bones, in your lungs and veins.

The sound of a live band, or loud music, so loud that you have to figure out how to talk in a different way. The way that at the end of the night your throat hurt from trying to be heard over the music, the kind of music you can't help but dance to.

Daniel didn't think he'd get the chance to go somewhere with Johnny like that.

Didn't think they could dance somewhere outside of the shadows or the darkness except for their room or a gay club which most of those carded and as far as Daniel knew he couldn't get in for three or four years and even then they might not let him in thinking his ID was a fake because of his LaRusso face.

Johnny, they might not even check his ID and that was frustrating.

He wouldn't blame them.

He wouldn't turn Johnny away either, but he was younger.

It was unfair.

But, maybe he just had to find the right places.

Places like this and maybe they could go more often. With their

friends, just the two of them, dancing together, in their own world.

Closer than any school teacher at prom would've ever allowed.

The band switched it up to a slow song and Daniel wrapped his arms around Johnny's neck and Johnny leaned down, arms around his waist as they swayed, stepping slowly in a lazy way.

Mr. Miyagi said it was important to understand one another to use the balance wheel, to gather cues without needing to talk. To be able to know where the other was going without seeing them, just by feeling. Sight wasn't needed.

A man who can't see can't fight.

Johnny had said that wasn't right. Maybe Johnny was right.

Mr. Miyagi was teaching them how to fight without looking, to have each other's back without seeing the other.

It still wasn't tournament training but, dancing with Johnny made it seem easy.

He could feel the subtle shift of Johnny's stance, the movement of his muscles, and knew where he wanted to go.

He was easy to follow, to breathe together, and move easily against the dance floor among other couples.

He wondered if he could turn the tables if Johnny could read him as easily as-

Johnny had stiffened.

Daniel looked up at Johnny.

"What's wrong?"

He was looking at something through the crowd.

"There's a guy staring at us," Johnny said.

"Like he wants to fight?" Daniel asked, taking over because he wasn't going to let some creep ruin his night of dancing with Johnny.

"No, but I've seen him before," Johnny said, following him, being led back into the dance, but on alert.

There was something in the way he said that that made Daniel wonder if he'd seen a ghost or something.

Halloween was coming up, Johnny had been reading *Dracula*.

"Are you sure he's staring at *us*?"

"We can test it," Johnny said.

"How?"

"Moving further into the crowd, closer to the band, we'll disappear there."

That was easy.

Bigger steps, old school slow dancing, one two three, one two three, it felt a little silly but Daniel didn't want to stop dancing with Johnny when there was a creep watching them.

Hopefully, the guy would piss off and leave them alone.

"So?" Daniel asked.

"Can't see him," Johnny said, following easily as Daniel led.

"Good," Daniel said, wanting the focus back on them, on each other, let the rest of the club fade away until they were too tired to keep dancing.

It turned out that neither of them wanted to stop.

Daniel refused to be the first one to stop dancing, to take a break and Johnny didn't say a word.

They would've continued stubbornly dancing until the club closed if Bobby hadn't found them motioning back towards their table.

Daniel would've chalked it up to competitiveness, but they didn't get a chance to dance often, hadn't ever danced together in a club.

He thought it was a combination of both.

Daniel followed, looking around, wondering if he should apologize for his friends to Mr. Silver, but he couldn't see the tall man in the crowd.

He felt a little bad that he'd just let Dutch be kind of a dick to him,

even if Mr. Silver had set off alarm bells in his head.

Johnny's hand held his the whole walk back, ever so gently.

He looked happy but there was a watchful look in his eyes as he scanned the crowd, looking for the creep he'd seen before.

They sat down in a heap at the table, sinking down next to one another on the booth side and Bobby set two glasses of ice water next to them.

"Where's Jessica?" Johnny said over the music.

"Dancing with Tommy," Bobby said pointing through the crowd at the two dancing.

"Jimmy and Dutch?"

"Found girls who didn't have dance partners," Bobby said pointing in another spot.

"Why aren't you dancing?"

"I've been dancing all night, I'm tired," he said plopping down on Johnny's other side and grabbing his own ice water. "You two never stopped, and I danced with Jessica, some girls visiting from Florida, a girl visiting from Paris, a girl and her friends visiting from Canada, and a guy from Texas who was even wearing a cowboy hat and boots. If a cowboy asks you to dance you dance," Bobby said with a grin.

"Must be hard being so popular," Johnny said into his drink.

"Exhausting," Bobby said with a grin, leaning back with a sigh.

Daniel leaned his head on Johnny's shoulder watching their friends dance.

Now that he sat down the exhaustion flooded his veins like a heavy blanket.

He didn't want to go anywhere.

This was his spot now.

He'd live there forever, let his bones rest wearily on that booth seat leaning against Johnny until the end of time, or at least until his tired feet stopped throbbing.

The ice water helped.

He'd known he was tired, but not until he sat down with his legs like jelly had he realized just how tired.

He smiled softly into his cup.

It was worth it.

A chance to go dancing with Johnny and their friends.

A night out dancing that didn't end in a fight, unlike every other time he tried to take a girl dancing.

Unlike Halloween, unlike Okinawa.

He sighed relieved against Johnny.

He hadn't realized how nervous he'd felt, determined to make taking Jessica out on the town a *third times the charm*. And it seemed it was. Because having Johnny with him and the guys, letting Dutch pick the place, it seemed to break a curse and maybe the rest of them could also be broken.

Party Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny got a call from Gabriella one day after they'd finished working at the shop and he had to go driving around in search of a fax machine he could borrow.

He made a mental note to buy a fax machine for the shop.

They might never need it again, but he still thought it might be useful.

Maybe they'd get fax orders.

Expand the bonsai shop.

If she was right then all the pieces would be in the palm of his hands.

He'd called Tommy immediately after his call with Gabriella.

They were all spending the night at Bobby's.

Mr. and Mrs. Brown were in the midst of Halloween baking and needed taste testers. A bunch of hungry college kids had brought the four of them to Bobby's house.

Daniel and Johnny were supposed to join them the following morning and Jessica was supposed to meet them there too. To continue her pie war with Bobby.

He was on a mission now and Mr. and Mrs. Brown's gory horror concoctions of sugary treats might have to wait.

He found a little mom-and-pop printing shop that let you rent their fax machine for some change and their phone for about a quarter.

He called Gabriella back and gave her the new number, the number for the fax machine and hovered.

He waited impatiently for the thing to finish coming through. He bought a tape recorder they had for sale and the batteries and fiddled with it putting it together while he waited.

The fax machine started to spit it through.

It was the guy.

The guy he'd seen in Mr. Miyagi's house.

The guy he'd seen at the club watching him dancing with Daniel, he'd looked so pissed, like he was fuming but was trying to look calm, smiling but it was angry, predatory, creepy.

Black hair slicked back into a tiny ponytail like a vampire knock-off, like someone dressed up for Halloween as Dracula, except he'd been dressed the way people in the Hills dressed when they wanted to look like a commoner.

The expensive clothes that didn't look expensive.

$5,000 jacket and t-shirt, that looked like he'd grabbed them out of a thrift shop but were actually designer if you knew what to look for. Like he was trying to underplay how much he made.

He was smiling at Johnny from the page that he snatched out of the fax machine. It was the exact same kind of smile Sid had.

It looked friendly but was actually a trap.

Perfectly designed to make it seem to everyone else that he was was being friendly, helpful, but he was speaking poison, each word laced in venom and he knew it, enjoyed every second of it like it was a fun game of cat and mouse.

He was wearing a suit in the picture.

Even from the picture, Johnny could tell the brand.

Sid had made him learn.

So he could glance at someone based on what they wore and know whether they were worth hanging out with.

It was an Ermenegildo Zegna Bespoke, an over $20,000 custom-made suit.

This was someone Sid would've liked.

Rich and powerful dripped off the picture.

He'd have made Johnny talk to him, tried to befriend him. If he'd known this guy was the owner of Cobra Kai, Sid would've been more

invested.

Terry Silver. Owner of Dynatox and Cobra Kai.

He picked up the phone again.

"Did you get it?" Gabriella asked.

"It's him."

"You sure? That's the guy who broke into Mr. Miyagi's house?"

"And showed up at the club."

"So you think he also has ties to Cobra Kai?"

"Barnes said Terry Silver is his sensei, and he's the one pulling the strings at the All Valley. Listen I gotta go home, I gotta show this to Mr. Miyagi and Daniel and see if they've seen him since. And I gotta tell the guys that I have a confirmed name and face," Johnny said handing the paper to the woman behind the counter who took it over to the copier to make him copies as he put a couple of bills on the counter. Putting the recorder in his jacket pocket.

"Johnny be careful, this guy is rich enough to bury almost anyone who comes across him."

"This guy has sent people to rough up my boyfriend, to terrorize him and Mr. Miyagi. They've beaten up Jessica and the guys. I'm not going to back down."

"I know you're not. I'm just asking you to be careful. Guys with power like that can make people disappear."

She sounded worried.

"Don't worry Gabriella, I'll be fine," Johnny said taking one of the copies he was handed and writing down a quick note.

He popped it in the fax machine again, checking the number he'd scrawled down for the Brown's fax machine and punched the number in.

"Don't do anything stupid. He's dangerous Johnny."

"I can't promise anything," Johnny said with an amused smile as he heard her huff over the phone. "But I'll try okay?"

"Fine. Okay, but I'm going to check back in on you later okay? I want to be kept in the loop. I'm going to ring Miyagi's place or, no, you're supposed to be at the Brown's tomorrow. I'm going to call around Johnny and if you drop off the grid I'm coming up there and finding you."

Johnny didn't have any siblings.

He had the guys who were like brothers, and he had girl friends he kind of thought of as sisters, the kids he babysat treated him like a big brother, but that tone, Gabriella was like a cool older sister. Worried because she'd probably heard the stories. She'd gone to the divorce proceedings. She knew Johnny got himself in trouble almost as much as Daniel did, but Johnny didn't talk about it. Didn't complain. The only way to find out was to corner him and find out.

Johnny knew he could handle himself but she was worried and she'd be pissed at him if he got into too much trouble.

He smiled.

"Yeah yeah, got it. I'll do my best."

That seemed to be enough, it was the best he could give.

He gathered up his final piece of paper when the fax machine was done with it then thanked the couple running the shop and hurried out to the Avanti.

He had a lot he had to do.

He had had a plan he'd been toying with, and there were steps, but step one was to get home and have an emergency house meeting.

He imagined he'd walk in and Mr. Miyagi and Daniel would be sitting in the garden and he'd hold up the piece of paper with Terry Silver's face on it and he'd explain that this was a bad bad man and if they saw him they should go the other way.

That he was the puppet master behind Mike Barnes and do not interact with this guy because he was nearly as rich as Midas and had access to toxic waste.

Johnny shuddered, they were lucky the guy hadn't poisoned their water, but he made a mental note to get a PH kit and check their water supply just to be on the safe side.

Of fucking course it was a bored rich guy with too much time on his hands.

When was it not?

He felt like he was in a Saturday morning cartoon.

Why the guy even cared was beyond him because he'd gone over the records, there was no way Terry Silver had Daniel on his radar at all.

There'd been no way they should've met.

But Silver must've known Kreese. Had to have. Kreese probably had mentioned him as one of his old war buddies. Which was why the name had sounded familiar.

It was the only connection.

But it wasn't like Daniel had destroyed Cobra Kai. Kreese had.

By publically...because he'd...

His mother had killed Cobra Kai.

Was she in danger?

Had she been quietly fending off Silver and just hadn't mentioned it to Johnny?

No.

She'd written the name down like she'd never heard it before.

So his mother who was as far as he'd last known, trying to find Silver and sue him into the ground hadn't been enough of a threat? And Daniel had?

Because why?

Why Daniel?

Why was it *always* Daniel?

If Kreese was pissed with anyone shouldn't it have been *him*?

He'd made it clear he wanted to kill Johnny.

Johnny swallowed hard.

He thought he'd gotten better about it.

But this was so close.

If Silver was like Kreese then Daniel wasn't just in slight danger.

This wasn't like Chozen.

This was big red neon lights and the tournament was a trap.

He didn't know how, but he'd figure it out.

He'd go over the rules, go over how it worked.

Kreese had wanted them to break Daniel's leg, destroy his knee.

Thankfully they'd failed, but Silver?

This was a very specific attack, designed just for Danie.

How would they get away with it in front of a crowd without it being obvious and what would they do?

Break his bones?

Permanent damage?

Or straight-up murder in front of a crowd?

Kreese wasn't above that and he had a bad feeling Silver was in the same mindset.

His fingers gripped the steering wheel tighter.

Maybe he'd book a cruise.

Take Mr. Miyagi and Daniel on a cruise of the Bahamas until after the tournament.

They'd come back to the ashes of the shop, maybe Silver would burn down the house and the garden.

But staying seemed like a bad idea.

Dangerous.

He couldn't leave the bonsai behind, couldn't leave the places unprotected.

Mr.Miyagi and Daniel had worked so hard.

But Johnny wanted to grab both and run for the hills, put them somewhere safe, and then come back, sweep away the remnants of Cobra Kai that refused to die no matter how hard his mother tried to stomp them out until it was safe for them to return.

Cobra Kai felt like it was *his* problem.

It had been his dojo.

He's the one who'd walked into that dojo as a kid and thought he'd found the perfect spot for him finally. A home, a community, a family. All the things he'd been looking for, a spot to belong to, the perfect ground to put roots down and grow.

He just hadn't realized how poisoned the earth had been beneath his feet. And now because of him, it was a part of Daniel's life, it'd found Mr. Miyagi.

The guys had escaped with ease. Just shrugged it off like old snakeskin, but after every good thing Daniel and Mr. Miyagi had done for him that damn cobra had found its way back in, led in by Johnny because he hadn't been able to fight it off.

He'd let it win.

Mr. Miyagi had scared it off, but Johnny should've known it'd slink off to heal its wounded pride and come back with its own friends and go after all of Johnny's weak spots and ignore him.

His friends, his boyfriend, Mr. Miyagi, the house, the garden, the bonsai, the shop, hell the girl across the street.

Johnny parked the Avanti and hopped out of the car.

The Ford wasn't there but the lights were on.

"Hey, Mr. Miyagi? Where'd Daniel go? He's here right?" Johnny asked hopping out of his shoes, tripping as he rushed, papers under his arm.

"Daniel-san leave. Make stand. Quit bad teacher," Mr. Miyagi said looking out past Johnny the way Daniel probably had gone with a frown, with a worry. "Miyagi go after."

"Okay, I'll come too, but hey, Mr. Miyagi, this guy," Johnny said holding up the picture of Terry Silver. "You see this guy around? He

owns Cobra Kai, and Mike Barnes, and I caught him sneaking around the house, he broke in. Please tell me you haven't seen him around."

Johnny was hoping for a negative.

Praying with all his heart that Mr. Miyagi had never seen the guy.

That he would've told Johnny like Johnny had asked him all those months ago if he saw a tall guy with slicked-back hair.

But it was immediate in his face, the way his eyes widened in shock, the way he hurried towards the door. Past Johnny.

Johnny dropped the papers and hurried after him, quickly shoving his shoes back on his feet.

"Mr. Miyagi?" Johnny asked as Mr. Miyagi hurried to the passenger side of the Avanti.

"Johnny-san, just once, drive very fast."

"Where?" Johnny said starting up the car and peeling out of the lot.

"Cobra Kai dojo. Daniel-san quitting. Mr. Silver I think. Must be."

"Shit!" Johnny said realizing what he meant.

What all those bruises on Daniel's hands and feet were from.

Only Cobra Kai taught like that.

Johnny should've realized.

He always came home bruised and battered.

Johnny had been squirrely about it himself when he'd come home from Cobra Kai. But he'd always been bruised, it was so commonplace that no one asked, he'd gotten so good at hiding it that no one noticed it.

Daniel didn't hide it, not well, and with Mr. Miyagi's medicine he always healed up pretty quickly. And he was so damn stubborn.

Even if Johnny had figured it out earlier, there was a chance Daniel wouldn't have believed him, wouldn't have budged.

Because that's what happened.

It'd happened to him. Johnny had had to hit rock bottom to see who Kreese had been. And hell Kreese was probably lurking around there somewhere.

It was a trap and Daniel was going in with all that optimism and hope that sometimes dimmed but never died. Hope that it could be a quick understanding between adults, not a petty grown man who'd been playing with Daniel and wouldn't enjoy his game-ending early.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Johnny asked.

"Hope not same man. Mr. Silver came, said Kreese dead. Thought needed proof. Miyagi keept checking. No dead Kreese. No obituary. No check-in at morgue."

It was hard to imagine Mr. Miyagi asking around the morgue for a dead Kreese. For him.

"Kreese bad teacher, still important part of Johnny-san's life. Death still hurt."

There was no way Kreese was dead.

He'd seen him at the airport with his blue bag heading into international departures as they were arriving from Okinawa.

He'd smelled the cigar smoke first.

He'd never forget that smell.

It would be locked in his memory for life.

It used to be a smell of home. Of Cobra Kai and learning karate and studying and having someone who cared about him.

But it had triggered a fight or flight response. It's made him freeze in the airport as the breeze carried the smell to him, as he saw Kreese walking off like he didn't have a care in the world, unable to look away until he was out of sight, until he was gone, like a phantom from his nightmares, an old memory haunting him, until Daniel came back to get him, pulling him out of that petrified moment, with the gentle warmth of his hand and out of the airport.

He'd been a sitting duck.

And Daniel was in danger and didn't know it.

He drove as fast as he dared through the streets of Reseda, that familiar path to Cobra Kai feeling his heart pound loudly in his ears, the buzz of his blood in his veins.

"He's not dead Mr. Miyagi," Johnny managed. "I saw him at the airport when we got back from Okinawa."

He wouldn't even contemplate that Kreese was dead.

That he'd seen a ghost heading off on vacation.

If Kreese was dead and a ghost, he'd haunt Johnny.

There'd be no way he wouldn't have noticed Johnny.

He would've taunted him.

Only a living Kreese would've ignored him, would've had places to be and things to do.

"Why not say?" Mr. Miyagi asked, voice filled with concern.

"I-I was shocked, and then Seven Seas was gone and you both were upset and it just never seemed important," Johnny sighed. "We're going to have to start just talking about everything, aren't we? Mr. Miyagi, this is going to be dangerous. Like if Terry Silver is going after Daniel that means you're also in their crosshairs, and the fact he's been going after the shop, the bonsai, he's going to try and hurt you too. I think I'm not really on his radar because..."

He'd lost, he'd failed, he was dead to Kreese. Not worth the annoyance.

"Get help or something Mr. Miyagi. I'll get Daniel."

"Johnny-san," Mr. Miyagi said.

"Listen Mr. Miyagi Cobra Kai is strike first and that's assault. If Daniel is in there and they rile him up and he punches first? They got him on assault. This guy he's rich. Gabriella thinks he's got a DA in his pocket. Which explains why my mother and Jimmy have had such a rough time getting Cobra Kai out of the Valley. We'll have to make a retreat tonight. Because getting Daniel out of there safely is the priority."

"Hai," Mr. Miyagi said thoughtfully as Johnny parked and jumped out of the car running towards Cobra Kai and pushing the doors open hoping he'd make it in time, before the trap was fully sprung.

And maybe...He pushed the play button on the recorder in his pocket.

He got a whiff of that cigar smoke as soon as he opened the door and he hurried past everything and towards the sound of voices. Towards Mike Barne's coming out from the back.

"I'm what he's talking about, shithead!"

He saw Daniel, Terry Silver in a black gi looming over him, hand out to block Mike Barnes from coming closer.

Daniel looked pale, was backing away, holding his hand out as Silver yelled at him, following him.

Johnny rushed forward, put himself between them, pushing Daniel behind him.

Mike Barnes stopped in his tracks.

"You."

"Miss me?" Johnny asked. "I told you I'd know if you went near Daniel again."

The look on Barnes's face was worth it.

Startled and shocked.

"Johnny, we gotta go," Daniel said hurrying towards the door, pulling on Johnny's arm.

"What's wrong with you Barnes?" Silver asked, frowning.

"That's the guy,"

"That's the guy," Silver repeated, rolling his eyes.

Daniel wasn't behind him anymore, holding onto his arm.

Johnny's back was to the door, keeping an eye on them, backing up towards the door.

Trying to keep Daniel with him, moving safely towards the door.

Not turning his back to them.

He wouldn't let Silver or Barnes follow them.

But there was something in Silver's eyes, an amused smile like Johnny had made a mistake, had missed something.

He had only a moment to contemplate what it could be when he heard the footsteps behind him, the smell of cigar he caught as he entered the dojo had been so strong.

Too strong.

He hadn't thought about why it'd be strong near the door but not the rest of the dojo.

He'd been focused on getting Daniel and going, on keeping himself between Daniel and the danger.

Away from Mike Barnes and Terry Silver.

He'd made a mistake.

He pushed Daniel out of the way, closer to the wall.

They wouldn't go around them.

Daniel could still slip out the door behind them.

He could escape.

If he moved fast enough.

Johnny could be the distraction.

"Hello, again Mr. Lawrence."

It curled around him like the cigar smell of cigar smoke, as that right arm went around his neck and pulled him back against a solid immovable wall.

"Losers aren't welcome in this dojo Lawrence, you know that. You remember the punishment for losing right?"

"See?" Terry Silver said laughing, eyes full of delight, smacking Barnes shoulder. "This the punk you're scared of?"

The fear Johnny had instilled in Barnes, the warning, faded and he saw a grin.

Saw the look on Daniel's face, that fear mixing with anger.

He wanted Daniel to run.

To escape.

He knew now, that it'd all been tricks and lies.

This wasn't Chozen, Chozen who'd made sure he'd had space to breathe.

There'd be no way to choke out a "Run" like he wanted to, no desperate way to get him to move. To get Daniel's legs to run and carry him out of the dojo and to safety.

Johnny closed his eyes.

When he'd started hanging out with Mr. Miyagi, when Mr. Miyagi had started teaching him kata there'd been a day where they were sitting on the back of the truck eating lunch.

Daniel had been doing something with his mom.

It'd been nice. Nice to just sit with the old man and have lunch.

It'd been before Okinawa, before graduation, one of those moments where Johnny struggled with asking what he'd wanted to ask for months. But had had trouble seeking out his answer because it had brought back flashes of that night in the parking lot and he'd freeze up.

"Mr. Miyagi, how do you stop someone?"

"Stop someone?" Mr. Miyagi had asked looking up at him.

"I panicked last time," Johnny said quietly, voice barely a whisper.

Mr. Miyagi looked at him for a moment then nodded. He set his food down and turned to Johnny, slowly going through different situations, different moves, slow and calm, patient when Johnny asked him to explain it again and again until he memorized it.

Johnny put his hands on Kreese's elbow and pulled down, curling forward, bending his knees.

He was distracted, talking to Terry, laughing. Like trying to murder someone was as easy as just holding a bag of groceries.

Johnny could feel Kreese's breath on his neck.

He slipped his leg back, behind Kreese's, and with all of his might spun to the side, his leg sweeping Kreese's leg and sending him to the mats. He landed a punch to Kreese's throat before bouncing pack and out of the way.

While Kreese coughed Johnny turned his attention back to Barnes.

"Wanna go?" Johnny asked, fists up, knowing Daniel was behind him, watching his back, watching Kreese.

Daniel could handle Kreese, or pull them out. Especially while Kreese was still coughing.

Barnes turned pale.

"You little shit," Silver yelled. "I will kill you. And Danny boy will fight in the tournament and he will lose. And he'll lose slow. And painful. And we'll bring back Cobra Kai. The whole damn Valley will be full of them."

Johnny heard the doors open.

Mr. Miyagi.

Thank god.

"We thought there was a party happening,"

"Looks like we missed some of the excitement."

"Woah, Kreese you look pretty awful for someone who's supposed to be dead. You a zombie or something?"

"Yeah sorry, we didn't come to the funeral, couldn't find it. No one sent us the details."

"Well, it's obvious now why not."

"Thought everything stank like lies. Hey, look it's the old man who says he's from Korea. Do you remember your Korean yet 바보? Thought I told you to piss off and leave Daniel alone creep?"

"Shit," Barnes said, backing up.

Terry Silver grabbed his shoulder.

"We don't run, Barnes," he growled.

"Right," Barnes said but he looked nervous.

"Boys," came Kreese's raspy voice. "Long time no see."

"Not your boys," followed the sound of a bell.

"Well well well, look whose here. The big war hero," Silver said. "What are you waiting for?"

Barnes shot forward and Johnny tripped him and smacked him in the back, sending him stumbling into the lights, flicking them off.

Mr. Miyagi stepped up to the mat, a deep frown on his face as he moved in front of Johnny.

Kreese got up, walking over to Silver, turning to him as they bowed to each other.

"Party Time."

"We're old friends," Kreese said slapping Silver's shoulder and stepping forward to meet Mr. Miyagi who'd walked forward onto the mat.

"Come on Johnny, let's go," Tommy was saying, tugging at him.

He glanced back, the guys were pulling Daniel to the door, but he was dragging his feet.

He wouldn't go until Johnny left and Johnny knew neither of them would leave Mr. Miyagi behind.

"We wait," Johnny said softly.

"I shouldn't have worn my favorite shirt today," Tommy murmured at his side with a sigh, easily falling into that old familiar stance, ready to fight should Barnes pop up again, but Johnny thought he wouldn't.

He hadn't hit the wall hard, he wasn't bleeding, he was for sure faking it.

He caught Barnes's eye and watched as Barnes went back to playing injured and out for the count.

He had half a mind to go over and kick him.

He was kind of moving like a beetle that had fallen onto his back. Or a guy from a national soccer team anytime someone breathed on them.

When Johnny's attention went back to Mr. Miyagi he saw Kreese land face-first into the mat and shut his eyes. Mr. Miyagi walked towards Silver who was waving his arms and making strange noises. The guys came up close, watching the fight.

Daniel beside him, the paleness he'd noticed earlier fading, taking Johnny's hand.

"Come on, little man! Let's see how good you really are!"

All of Terry Silver's moves were fast, chopping movements. Big kicks, big punches, and Mr. Miyagi ducked around them easily, before using that momentum to send him headfirst into one of the walls. Every movement Mr. Miyagi blocked or got out of the way.

He made it look easy, using Terry Silver's momentum against him, knocking him to the ground, sending his charge when he got back up straight into the mirrors on the back wall.

The mirror shattered as Terry fell into it and paint buckets fell on top of him, covering his gi and his hair in white paint.

Mr. Miyagi bowed to him, copying the moves and sounds Terry had made at the beginning of their fight.

"You think this is the end of it old man? I'm going to open Cobra Kai dojos all over this Valley. Hell! I might even teach for *free*! From now on when people say karate around here all they'll hear will be Cobra Kai karate!" Silver got up, yelling at them as Mr. Miyagi walked back towards them.

He reached out and grabbed Kreese's gi and pulled him close, pointing at him.

"John Kreese's karate! You won't even be a memory!"

"Says the guy with no students except one that he had to ship in and promise money," Johnny said, throat hurting.

"You," Terry Silver said, the hyena laughter that had begun turning into a growl. "Will die after we break Daniel, every bone in his body, ripping that championship title from his weak-willed hands."

"We all will eventually. But if you mean that you're *threatening* me-"

"Of course you fucking loser. You better sleep with one eye open."

"I think that would creep Daniel out a bit," Johnny said, he started to turn towards the door.

Mr. Miyagi had already walked past, towards the door, speaking softly to Daniel.

The guys were waiting.

But Johnny still had to point out the obvious that was clearly being missed.

"You should know Terry Silver, that's the second time John Kreese has tried to kill me. He's failed twice now. I don't know where that fits in your whole no losing thing. Or with your thoughts on failure. But I'm not scared of you and Mr. Miyagi, is the best karate teacher in the whole valley. Hell, probably the whole country. Look how many students Kreese lost to him. And the fact is Kreese lost those students because he couldn't hold his temper. Because he tried to kill me."

The laughter that had been on Kreese's lips also stopped and he looked at Johnny. All the embers within Johnny that sometimes sparked with the feeble hope that there was a chance that Kreese would feel remorse, that he cared, that those five years of their student-teacher faux father-son relationship had meant anything were doused by the look on his face of disgust and hatred.

Just like Sid.

"Next time, sometime when you're alone, without your friends, without that little man, all alone like you were born to be then I will finish the job," Kreese said. "You will stop breathing, and die all alone in a gutter like you were meant to from the start, and you will just be a bad taste, of a failed student I should've never let step foot into my dojo. A mar on the Cobra Kai name."

Terry Silver grinned, looking at Kreese, and began laughing again.

Kreese didn't laugh, it was a threat and a promise.

Johnny turned, walking past Barnes who was sitting on the floor and out the doors of the dojo.

Daniel and Mr. Miyagi had been talking and were out the door.

The van was sitting on the sidewalk like Dutch had driven it in such a hurry that he hadn't even parked properly, the doors were even still

open.

"We'll meet you at Miyagi's," Bobby said softly, hand gently hovering over his arm, reaching and then squeezing lower on his arm.

"Okay," Johnny said walking to the Avanti, hand going into his pocket, into and clicking the button, hoping he'd done it right.

He paused.

"Mr. Miyagi, ride with Daniel," he told the older man who nodded, seeing the way Daniel had hovered.

"I'm coming with you," Daniel said.

"But your Ford," Johnny said looking at the yellow Ford that Daniel loved parked across the street.

If they left it there, if they left it behind there was a high chance it'd be destroyed.

"Miyagi drive it," Mr. Miyagi said holding out his hand.

"You sure?" Daniel asked.

"Hai."

Daniel fished around in his pockets, hands trembling as he handed the keys over to Mr. Miyagi.

Johnny wanted to reach out and pull Daniel into his arms and hold him close, but he didn't trust that if they stayed any longer that monsters licking their wounds inside the dojo wouldn't run out and try and finish the job.

Every second they delayed felt dangerous.

Daniel walked carefully around to the other side of the Avanti, pulling his red jacket around himself like he was cold despite how hot and windy it was from the Santa Ana winds.

Johnny sunk down into the Avanti, feeling the engine come to life, a purr of comfort as he pulled away, a careful drive back home, back to Mr. Miyagi's.

Adrenaline was still pumping through his veins and he felt antsy. But right now the only thing that needed to happen was to get them home

and to get them home safely. Then they could put this nightmare to rest.

Chapter End Notes

바보 means fool, idiot, also like a clown

A Billion Kisses

Chapter Notes

> For the purpose of this fic Daniel only studied under Silver for like a month and a half or two months-ish without him going every day, just a couple of times a week if that. So a lot less than in the movie.
>
> Also, warning, spiraling incoming.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daniel's hands wouldn't stop shaking. He ended up sticking them under his armpits in the hope that it would help. His heart was pounding in his ears and he kept looking at Johnny.

Johnny's hair was messed up, the usual fluff sticking up in the back from where Kreese had been. His neck was red again. His voice had that rasp to it.

He'd been so grateful to see Johnny suddenly appear in front of him.

To watch the way Mike Barnes had stepped back like Johnny was an apparition of ass-kicking in his future, but when they'd gone to leave when Kreese had appeared Daniel had nearly snapped.

Had zeroed in on the type of move he would have to make to break Kreese's legs like the practice dummy. But was worried he'd get Johnny's by accident.

He'd been so furious and panicked and scared all at once.

And his blood was still buzzing in his veins, and his eyes were welling with tears.

"How could I be so stupid?" Daniel said, voice cracking. "Why am I *always* so stupid?"

Johnny had shut his eyes and Daniel had thought he'd never open them again.

He didn't know how long it took.

But Johnny hadn't fought back. He'd just curled inward. Hadn't said a

word.

He'd wanted to move but he didn't know how to, what to do to bring a stop to it.

He'd been eyeing the trophies on the case, his plan had been to grab one and slam it into the back of Kreese's head.

But he didn't know if he'd make it in time. And Mr. Silver was just laughing. Delighted in watching, how he'd ever thought a man like that cared.

"You're not stupid for getting conned by a con man," Johnny said.

"I should've known! What kind of stranger would take someone like me and train them for a tournament?"

"Mr. Miyagi?"

"*Johnny.*"

"I believed for 5 years that Kreese liked me," Johnny said.

Every word he said sounded like it hurt.

His blue eyes met Daniel's then flicked back to the road.

"And that was a man who taught me to trust *no one.* But trusting people, Daniel it's good. Not everyone is like Kreese or Silver. There are shitty people in this world, but also...good people. And if people like Silver or Kreese make you stop trusting or believing in the good of others then they win."

Daniel rubbed at tears falling down his cheeks and brushed them away with his palms.

"I walked straight into his trap."

"Yeah, but you didn't know. How could you have? You trusted him because you're a good person, you want to believe in people. And that's a good quality. It's a good thing. Terry Silver is a *bad* guy. And not small potatoes Daniel. You didn't get tricked by some trying to sell you insurance for alien abductions out of the back of his truck. You were tricked by a very rich and very powerful man. Someone who has a DA in his pocket and who dumps toxic waste in other countries, who seems to only own Cobra Kai as a hobby, or because Kreese is his old war buddy. He has the money and the means to pulls scams with his

free time and he set the whole thing up, got Barnes to scare you straight into his dojo, *where he taught you*, for some bizarre reason how to be *even more deadly* than you already are. Clearly, he didn't do his research and didn't know how badly that crane kick fucking hurt," Johnny was smiling, a soft painful laugh as he drove, and for some reason that hurt Daniel more. "Or that you spent your summer fighting to the death overseas. He tried to get you Daniel, but he failed because you went to quit right? You knew something was wrong. It doesn't matter how long the con lasted, you're the one who ended it. The one who looked around and said hey wait a minute, this isn't right. And that's brave Daniel, incredibly brave, and you always are. Even when you're scared."

It wasn't fair.

Johnny had nearly died again and he was comforting Daniel.

His soft voice was scratchy and hurt.

Daniel got punched. Daniel got kicked.

But Johnny always got choked.

People always went straight for his throat.

Would he not let Daniel near him again?

Would they fall backward?

He hadn't been choked *before* Daniel had he?

He'd been the tough guy on campus that people left alone.

But now, because of Daniel, he'd nearly died three times in less than a full year.

Twice had been by Kreese. And Daniel hadn't done anything either time.

He was safer without Daniel around.

Safer apart.

He couldn't stop shaking.

Couldn't stop crying.

Terry had found them because of him. Had found out about Johnny because Daniel had said he wanted to learn how to be stronger to protect his boyfriend and he hadn't even been able to do that.

Silver had tried to hurt Daniel and he had.

But even worse than that, he'd hurt Johnny because of Daniel. Because of Daniel Johnny had gone back into the Cobra Kai dojo, straight back into Kreese's arms where he immediately tried killing him again.

The Avanti pulled to the side of the road in the dark and the hazard lights turned on.

"What are you doing?" he asked, voice watery, unsteady.

Johnny pushed back his seat.

"Do you want to come here or do you want me to come to you?"

Daniel stared at him.

Daniel wanted to tell Johnny that he should run, far far from Daniel, like his life hinged on it, because clearly, it did.

Just like Johnny had said after the doctor's appointment this type of thing wasn't ever going to stop, and it always got worse somehow.

Johnny had said Silver had a long reach, was powerful. And Terry had promised to kill him. Kreese had promised to kill him. They'd both laughed and turned their eyes off of Daniel and onto Johnny and if he didn't run now, leave Daniel behind, then he wouldn't make it.

There'd be no apartment filled with flowers and books.

No making Johnny Italian food.

No seeing his family flip out over the sweater his Nonnia had sent.

No introducing Johnny to the rest of the family.

No sitting with him and his mother again.

It'd be better that way.

Safer for Johnny.

If he let him go now then he could run.

He could go to his Mom's home or take those long legs somewhere else.

Somewhere safe.

Safe from the shrapnel that always hurt the people around Daniel but always cut deeper for some reason with Johnny.

Always tried to mortally wound him.

If Johnny left now he could make it.

He could become someone else.

He could become a park ranger somewhere, spending his days walking among giant ancient trees, teaching kids about nature.

He could become a librarian at some big library somewhere nice and quiet, far away.

He could be a florist in a small quiet town, where he got to know everyone and everyone would get to know him.

Maybe he could sell books somewhere, recommending good books to people who were a little lost.

He could go backpacking through mountain ranges, drive his dear Avanti and enjoy the nights full of stars until he found a nice beach.

He could go to Hawaii and become a surfer.

He could pick up a modeling contract somewhere overseas.

Maybe he'd fall in love again, with some nice person, whose life wasn't fraught with danger and pain.

And they could live out that dream Daniel had.

Johnny making repairs and someone cooking home-cooked meals for him that were healthy, getting up early to have coffee before heading off to work.

And Daniel would stay in Reseda and he'd stay with Mr. Miyagi and he'd compete in the tournament and find a way to beat Mike or he'd fail.

It wouldn't matter, because his heart would be gone.

Somewhere else, somewhere safe, and it'd grow and it'd flourish, somewhere safe away from him.

"Daniel," Johnny said quietly. "Breathe."

Johnny's hand reached out and took his, shifting towards him, climbing over the console and towards him.

"What are you doing?" Daniel asked.

"You didn't answer, so I'm coming to you. Though this is going to be kinda awkward," Johnny said shifting, studying Daniel carefully before sitting carefully on his lap and wrapping his arms around Daniel.

"Breathe Daniel," Johnny said softly in his ear.

"You should run," Daniel said.

"Not happening."

"You could have a better life."

"Not possible."

"But-"

"Keep breathing."

"I didn't save you."

"That's okay. I saved myself."

Johnny had rested his head atop Daniel's and Daniel wrapped his arms around Johnny, gripping the back of his shirt.

"Why won't you run?"

"Because I like where I am."

"But it's safer!"

"Am I too heavy?" Johnny asked. "Going to break those legs you've been working out?"

"No," Daniel said softly letting go of his shirt to hold him tighter.

Johnny made a soft hum and fell quiet.

Daniel listened to him breathe, listened to his heartbeat in his chest, the weight of him solid and whole in his lap.

He didn't want to let him go.

He didn't know if that made him more selfish, eviler than Silver.

But he wanted to keep Johnny.

Didn't want to give up on all those dreams.

Wanted to stay by his side, together.

"It's okay," Johnny said. "It will be okay."

He sounded so sure. Just like he had in Okinawa.

Steady and sure when Daniel was overwhelmed. When he was panicking.

"Johnny,"

"Hmm?"

"I asked Mr. Miyagi to teach me for the tournament."

"You sure?"

"Yeah," Daniel managed.

"I'll add Mrs. Douglas to my list."

"Your list?"

"People I gotta call."

He wasn't shaking anymore.

He was breathing better.

The tears had stopped finally and he sniffed pulling back ever so slightly and rubbing his eyes.

"I'm sorry for not telling you. I-I wanted to just train somewhere where I wasn't distracted."

"Distracted?" Johnny asked. "By what?"

"You. You're very distracting when I'm trying to practice."

"You're the one who tends to want to spar and then to *stop sparring*."

"Because you're distracting."

"You're going to have to point it out next time because I'm pretty sure that's a you problem," Johnny said amused, a small teasing smile.

Daniel gently smacked his chest.

"The point is, he offered me a space to study and then kept talking about helping me train. So I went and I had the dojo to myself like most of the time to study and I thought, it was kind of nice to use the equipment and to just have a designated space for it. And then a couple of times he'd try and train me on stuff. And it was nice to just focus. But everything he taught me was weird. But he made it sound like it made sense."

"Yeah," Johnny said, arms resting on Daniel's shoulder and behind him on the seats, blue eyes focused on him.

"It was only when I repeated it, that it didn't make sense. Like when I mentioned it to you, and to your mom and-"

"You told my mom and not me?"

"I thought you'd be upset I wasn't training with you."

"I mean yeah."

Daniel looked up at him again.

"Okay, then what can I do to make it all up to you?"

"Make what up to me?" Johnny asked head tilted.

"Lying-"

"You didn't lie."

"Fine, keeping secrets."

"We're not supposed to keep secrets?"

"Johnny, I'm trying to apologize. You got hurt because of me. Let me make it up to you."

Johnny looked around thoughtfully like he'd pick some sort of treat from the quiet night, from the closed shops and empty streets, from the glow of the lights above.

He then smiled and looked down at Daniel.

"One billion kisses."

"What?" Daniel asked.

"If you want to make it up to me I want a billion kisses."

"That's a lot."

"Don't think you can do it?"

There was a challenge in Johnny's voice.

Like it was a dare.

Daniel could never back down from a dare with Johnny. Never turn away a challenge.

He didn't know how Johnny did it, how he helped him regain balance so easily.

And he knew if he looked closer Johnny wasn't quite so steady himself.

That it had been a big deal.

That it had reopened old wounds.

But now that Daniel had regained his balance, he'd helped Johnny with his, once the adrenaline holding him together faded.

Until then...a billion kisses.

Daniel licked his lips, cupping the side of Johnny's face.

"I've got a lot of work to do," Daniel said leaning forward and kissing him.

Chapter End Notes

Alien abduction insurance is real btw (though probably isn't sold out of the back of a truck) and not where I expected it to be from,

which is Florida 👽. Also, I read it's a thing in the UK too.

Cigar Smoke

Daniel had stopped crying. That hyperventilating panic seemed to have calmed. And he was kissing Johnny. Moving like he wanted to move them somewhere, but he couldn't move, not in the car, not in that position, so his hands ran all over Johnny, along his back, into his back pockets, like he wanted to pull his shirt off, while his tongue was greeting Johnny's like they hadn't seen each other in years, even though they'd made out earlier that day, in the morning at home, and at the shop when no one was around, when Mr. Miyagi was out talking to Jessica's aunt about the pots and answering her questions about the bonsai they'd gifted them.

Johnny had to pull away, a little breathless.

Daniel grinned up at him.

"How was that?"

Maybe asking for a billion kisses was going to be the death of him. Or at least land them both in jail for some stupid law he didn't know about.

Daniel's hands had decided Johnny's back pockets were where they wanted to stay and Johnny was pretty sure Daniel had asked him a question but he'd lost it. He didn't want to move. He didn't want to care about laws or decency. The adrenaline of the night was fading and he'd been so focused on Daniel, that his goals were fading away.

The anger that had made his blood boil, he'd wanted to hold onto that, just a thread of it and use it to focus, but it was dissipating fast.

What it was leaving behind however was just the fear, the fear of when Kreese's shadow had fallen over him, when that cigar smoke enveloped him, all too familiar like too frequent nightmares he'd tried to forget.

The fear of knowing Daniel had been in danger and the frustration that no one had told him.

His goal had been to get the hell out of there as fast as possible.

To get Daniel somewhere safe, back to Mr. Miyagi's.

He was getting tired, drained

It'd been a question.

"Yeah," Johnny breathed.

"Nine hundred ninety-nine million nine hundred ninety-nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine kisses left," Daniel said.

"How about I get us home?" Johnny asked.

If he didn't pull away now he'd curl up next to Daniel and fall asleep.

Though maybe that'd be a decent revenge for every time Daniel fell asleep on him, but then he'd have to let Daniel drive and he wasn't *that* tired yet.

He carefully pushed himself up as Daniel let go of him and moved back to the driver's seat, readjusting it, flicking off the hazard lights, and pulling away from the curb.

Daniel's hand found his thigh.

They were closer to home than Johnny had originally thought which was a relief.

Mr. Miyagi was waiting on the porch, the lights were on and the van was parked nearby next to the yellow Ford.

"Looks like we worried Mr. Miyagi," Daniel whispered leaning over to kiss him on the cheek before pushing the door open.

Johnny stared ahead into the darkness, past the fence.

Somewhere out there was Kreese, pissed even more than before. And Silver and Barnes.

Chozen Johnny understood.

But Johnny no longer understood Kreese.

No longer wanted to.

He didn't want to understand Silver or Barnes either.

He just wanted them gone.

For his own nightmares to be gone, and for Daniel to be safe.

He looked for the anger he'd followed earlier.

The anger that has sparked, he wondered if he could get it to a bonfire, or if it'd freeze over.

Either he could work with. As long as it got him moving.

"Johnny you coming?" Daniel called.

"Yeah," Johnny said taking the keys of the Avanti and dropping them into his pocket.

He walked towards the house and the warm glow.

The guys were in the kitchen talking quietly.

Mr. Miyagi had joined them.

Daniel gently reached out taking Johnny's hand.

"I gotta make some calls before I forget," Johnny said. "I'll meet you."

Daniel studied him a moment before nodding and joining the guys.

Johnny turned and went to the phone.

Mr. Miyagi had gotten a little phone book for them with their collective important numbers in it.

Johnny hadn't thought he'd need it.

He'd memorized so many numbers, but now that his mother had moved and the mansion was no longer, now that the guys were off in dorm rooms, now that the circle of people in his life had expanded there were important numbers he didn't know.

He flicked open the book, flicking a couple of pages through, glancing at the time on the clock on the wall.

He carefully placed the phone to his ear, dialed the number, and waited.

"Hey," he said when he heard the line on the other end click as someone picked it up. "You mind helping me with something?"

He managed to find a spark of it.

That feeling he'd held onto while Daniel had been crying in the passenger seat.

That boiling anger.

The promise he'd made himself. He'd promised himself he'd get Daniel home. Safely at Mr. Miyagi's.

He'd planned to send him to bed, tuck him and get to work. But this worked too.

The guys talking to him quietly in the kitchen, too far away to hear his soft conversations.

Anger building up as he spoke. The spark leading to a simmering.

He was going to show Silver what revenge actually looked like.

Silver thought Johnny was nothing because Kreese thought he was nothing.

Not realizing who Johnny was. And Johnny was pissed. Pissed was easy. He could work with pissed.

He was the only son of Laura Lawrence, who had kept them going on a paycheck of practically nothing.

He'd lived in a car, on the beach, he'd survived bully after bully, shitty school after shitty school, he'd survived Sid Weinberg. He'd survived Kreese's shitty teaching techniques and now that blindfold was off.

He could see clearly the absolute bullshit Kreese had been shoveling and they'd picked the wrong boy.

They'd picked the wrong guy to mess with because maybe Johnny wasn't a cobra anymore but he still had fangs and he would bite so hard they'd never forget.

He worked his way through his mental list, moving pieces on the board.

Terry was out there playing a Saturday morning cartoon villain, and he'd left himself open focused on Daniel. Focused on the All-Valley and the Cobra Kai studio.

Johnny would show him everything he'd learned from Cobra Kai.

He'd strike hard, and he'd show no mercy.

A hand found his shoulder and he looked back at Bobby.

"Thanks," Johnny said to the person on the other end of the phone before hanging up.

That look was full of worry, concern and then he was pulled into a tight hug.

"I'm sorry you ran into Kreese again. I'm sorry he tried to kill you again. But I am so damn proud of you."

There was something in his tone that made that scratchy feeling in his throat return and Johnny's eyes water.

He hugged Bobby back, burying his head in his shoulder.

"We should've said something. Told you what Daniel told us. But we didn't want to tell you that Kreese was supposedly dead when he *clearly* wasn't. But it might've been better to have all worked on it together. Especially since you solved it. Dutch fucking screamed when we got your fax. Because he's the only one of us who'd seen Silver. I've never seen him panic like that. Practically ran out of the house cursing up a storm yelling about how he knew *that motherfucker was a liar, he'd been the one to say Kreese was dead.* We were going to go give him a piece of our mind. Didn't think Daniel would be there, or you. And oh god that van is not built for speed. Thought we were going to die before we got there. But then the Ford was there and the Avanti. I think until Dutch saw those and Mr. Miyagi at the phone booth, he was planning to crash through the fucking windows and hope Silver or Kreese were on the other side."

"There's a lot of cement, you all would've died."

"I have *never* claimed that any of us are smart," Bobby said with a laugh, hand coming to the back of Johnny's head and ruffling his hair. "I was prepared for anything you know, absolute blood bath but to walk in and see you back to back with Daniel. Daniel was facing the door and man I've never seen him look so fucking wild. Pissed. He had his foot on Kreese's chest and looked like he was about to beat the shit out of him when we came in. I gathered from your little speech and Daniel's catch up when you guys got home, that you're the one who put him on the ground. I'm so damn proud of you Johnny. You kicked

that bastard's ass. I'm sure it was a terrifying moment. Daniel said he just suddenly appeared out of nowhere."

"I think he was behind his cardboard cut-out," Johnny mumbled with a sniff.

"You know that checks out. When I started at Cobra Kai he would jump out from behind it to scare the students. I clocked him in the face the first time he did it to me, so he stopped. I remember panicking because I hadn't held back and apologizing and he told me not to apologize. I thought I'd get kicked out and was so damn worried over that punch, but now it's a moment I'm fond of."

He sounded proud, his arms moving to Johnny's waist, his knees bending and then picking Johnny up, ever so slightly off the floor in a tight bear hug.

Johnny wiped tears off his face quickly before he was set back down.

"You got to teach me how you did that."

They turned to see Daniel staring wide-eyed.

"Well I'm a bit taller than you," Bobby started.

He had that look in his eyes he sometimes got.

Determined and stubborn.

Daniel had gotten stronger lately, but the idea that he would pick Johnny up, even a little seemed to be like the way most kids looked at cake.

It was mildly terrifying to Johnny though.

He liked being solid and on the ground and if Daniel could lift him the ground was as good as gone.

"It's not necessary," Johnny said, but Bobby was pulling away, explaining how he found it easier if he picked Johnny up from the waist with his knees bent and then stood up.

How he used to be able to pick Johnny up higher. Like when they first became friends. He could just pick him up and throw him into the lake or the ocean, whatever body of water they were near, Jimmy's pool was another good one. But then all that muscle made Johnny heavier, and now it took two people to throw him into water. But he

could still hug him off the ground a little. Not as high as he used to when they were training because he was out of shape.

Johnny contemplated running.

Just bolting.

But Daniel had been crying specifically about him running and Johnny had said he wouldn't. So he wouldn't.

He swallowed hard, hoping Mr. Miyagi had made some tea somewhere for him to get some for his scratchy throat.

Johnny shot Bobby a dark look.

Daniel didn't need any more tricks up his sleeves.

"Hey, maybe he can use it to flip Barnes in the tournament. If he wants to learn anything I know how to do I'll teach him."

"It's karate Bobby, not wrestling," Johnny said sourly as Daniel's arms came around his waist.

Bobby laughed.

"Daniel be careful, please don't hurt yourself," Johnny said.

"I've never worked out this much in my life," Daniel said. "This is the most enjoyable way to tell if it's actually paid off."

Johnny sighed.

Daniel dipped down a little too low.

Johnny stood as still as possible, not trusting himself to breathe.

Daniel tried to stand and it was close. Teetering. A little off the ground. Further, then Johnny thought Daniel would get.

Daniel set him back down and frowned.

That look Johnny knew.

He wanted to try again.

Johnny put his hands on the arms around him and gently pushed them away.

"I need tea," Johnny said softly, he was doing everything in his power not to cough.

But he could feel it.

He'd talked too much on the car ride over, on the phone.

The crying on Bobby's shoulder hadn't helped.

Daniel looked up at him with a frown then his eyes widened.

"I'll get it," he said letting go turning, and hurrying off.

"He's fast when he wants to be," Bobby said sounding amused.

"I hate you," Johnny said before coughing, which hurt.

Bobby laughed softly, an arm wrapping around him. "Love you too."

They walked out to where the guys were sitting in the grass in the garden.

Johnny sat down among them.

They were chatting about Halloween talking about his Mom's party, trying to guess what her house would look like on the inside.

The mug Jessica had made him was held out to him full of hot tea.

He took it gently from Daniel

"Thank you," he said softly.

He took a sip.

It had honey in it and he remembered nearly ten or so months ago sitting in South Seas Apartment room 20 with Mrs. LaRusso, her handing him a cup of tea, patiently waiting to hear what he had to say.

A stranger at that time, barely an acquaintance who'd took one look at him and wordlessly made him tea, the same way Daniel had made it now.

The exact same way.

He blinked back tears.

Daniel sat down in the grass next to him, arm wrapping around his waist while he drank the tea enjoying the quiet peacefulness of the garden.

"Skeletons?" Jimmy asked.

"No," Daniel said.

"Right. Sorry," Jimmy said.

"What are other traditional monsters?" Dutch asked thoughtfully. "Vampires?"

"Did that," Johnny said.

"Werewolf?" Bobby asked

"Not as cool," Dutch said.

"Zombies?"

"My mom would get upset," Johnny said softly.

"Ghosts?" Tommy asked.

"That is an easy one," Bobby said.

"I can do ghosts," Johnny said quietly.

"Oh, you got an idea?" Jimmy asked. "Like you did our skeleton makeup?"

"And the demon make up before that."

"And the vampires the year before that."

"Yeah," Johnny said finishing his tea and setting his mug carefully down.

He was so tired now.

He'd just rest his eyes a little.

He laid down, putting his head In Daniel's lap.

It was less than a second before Daniel's fingers found Johnny's hair.

He was asking the guy about their Halloween costumes, about the

stuff Johnny had done.

"I'm assuming he'll do a test run tomorrow," Bobby said.

"Why tomorrow?"

"Halloween taste testing," Bobby said. "It's what we'd started when we got the fax Johnny sent. You guys were supposed to meet us in the morning."

"Right, shit, I forgot all about it," Daniel said.

"We'll just all go together in the morning," Dutch said.

"Daniel-san," Johnny peeled his eyes open.

Normally he'd have jumped up, moved to see what Mr. Miyagi needed but he was too tired to want to move.

He'd nearly fallen asleep.

Mr. Miyagi held out familiar green goop.

Johnny inwardly groaned.

"For Johnny-san's neck."

Daniel took the jar carefully.

"Thank you Mr. Miyagi."

Daniel looked down at Johnny.

"Will you be okay if I do this?" His voice was so soft, practically a whisper.

"You want to shower first or something?"

Johnny did want to shower. Get rid of the smell of cigar that lingered on his clothes, and his skin, the smell of the dojo, of the cologne Kreese used that usually was overwhelmed by the smoke.

He'd been trying to ignore it.

But now that he focused on it it was overwhelming and he sat up.

"Yeah," he said softly.

He got up heading off to the bathroom.

The last time Kreese had tried he'd seen it coming. Well, he hadn't *foreseen* Kreese trying to kill him. But he'd seen the anger in him, the tense lines all taunt like a trap prepared to be sprung. He'd seen it in the violent outburst when he'd snapped the second place trophy and threw it.

But he hadn't been able to stop himself.

He'd been so upset at how Kreese had behaved, how *he'd* behaved, how the guys had behaved and that outburst wasn't fair.

Hadn't been fair.

But this time.

Kreese had snuck up behind him.

A shadow that had just fallen over him, that horror movie feeling of something big and deadly with murderous intent right behind you.

He scrubbed at his skin with soap, tried smelling his shampoo, Daniel's shampoo.

He shifted in the shower so his back was to the tiled wall.

Last time he'd showered five times.

Every time he'd thought he was done and stepped out of the shower he'd catch the whiff of cigar smoke on his dirty clothes and it sent him right back into the shower.

He'd thrown everything out except the jacket, which he'd tried hanging up outside of his window.

Eventually, he'd had it dry cleaned and it had been better when he got it back.

He'd won.

He'd saved himself.

But he still felt bad.

There was a knock at the door.

"Yeah?" he called.

"Mind if I just sit in here?" Daniel asked opening the door a little.

"No," Johnny said softly brushing away tears, though he realized there wasn't really a point in it after he did it.

He heard the soft footsteps on the tile. Heard Daniel sit down outside of the tub shower.

"If you swapped to a bath I could wash your hair," Daniel said.

It was tempting.

Maybe tomorrow.

His skin was still too pink.

He also didn't want to stay in the bathroom all night.

He did want to go to bed.

To curl up next to Daniel.

He just knew as soon as that curtain opened the swirl of steam, the movement of the air would bring that cigar smell, the cologne right back to him and he'd shut the curtain again and he'd be back at square one.

"I know you're not okay," Daniel said softly. "How could you be? Tonight was bad. And it's okay to take your time. If you can't, if you need space let me know. If you need me closer, I will climb in there with you, if you need Bobby or one of the guys next to you tonight instead, I get it."

"Could you-"

He didn't want Daniel to get rid of his clothes.

It wasn't the clothes.

It was the smell.

"Get rid of the cigar smell?"

That probably didn't make any sense.

How did he succinctly explain it?

He didn't want to explain that Kreese always smoked awful cigars and so he always smelled like it and it clung to everything else. Like a fingerprint. Like he had paint on his hands but with his aura or something weird like that.

That he smoked when he wanted to say something ominous, like when they had meetings in his office about plans.

About how Johnny was *almost* perfect, just never perfect enough. *Close*.

He was working hard but never got there. Never where he should be.

How with all the work and effort he'd been putting in he just hadn't made it yet and that was kind of sad right?

To put all that effort in, to be a finger's breadth away from the goal and never quite reaching it.

Johnny had always left those meetings smelling of cigar smoke, determined to work harder.

But he'd learned it had been bait.

See how much he'd do if Kreese kept moving the goal post.

Now that smell turned his stomach.

He heard Daniel moving.

"Got it," Daniel said.

Did he? How?

Johnny barely got it.

A smell was a smell.

Even if it felt as thick as the arms that he always hoped would embrace him proudly but instead tried to kill him.

Twice.

He also didn't want Daniel to leave.

"Wait," Johnny said.

"Switch to a bath Johnny."

Johnny blinked and plugged the tub, switching the water over.

It was awkward to just stand there soaking wet waiting for the water to pool around his feet.

He heard the door open and Bobby's voice but couldn't make out the words over the sound of the water.

He hugged himself, shivering a bit before sinking down in the water. Better.

"You comfortable?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah," Johnny said softly into his arms that were hugging his knees to his chest.

Daniel pushed the curtain open.

He wasn't standing, was sitting on the other side of the tub and he leaned back after pushing the curtain open, back to the opposite wall, facing Johnny.

Daniel leaned an arm on the side of the tub and put his head in his hand.

He just sat there while the bath filled the rest of the way before leaning over and turning it off.

"Want me to talk?" Daniel asked softly.

Johnny nodded, resting his chin on his knee.

Daniel looked thoughtful for a moment, like he was picking a topic, though Johnny knew he rarely stayed on topic, didn't know how he could if he felt as frazzled as Johnny felt. As exhausted.

"Did you wash your hair already?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah."

"Then how about I do your back?"

Johnny nodded and Daniel leaned over to get his soap and a

washcloth to wash Johnny's back, gentler than Johnny had been on his own skin.

He talked about the shop. About the budding relationship with the garden shop Dutch and Johnny had gone to and how they wanted to work together at some gardening festival.

They'd paid for the booth and would talk about dirt and Mr. Miyagi would create some designs and maybe teach a class.

He talked about how he kept fielding calls because of the interview with Mr. Miyagi in the magazine Tommy's aunt had connected with them.

They were flourishing.

"Which means," Daniel said leaning forward. "I need to know how you want to be paid."

"In kisses," Johnny said.

Daniel looked surprised then laughed. "Johnny I'm already drowning in kissing debt."

"You're smart. You'll figure it out."

"Figure it out? I meant did you want to be paid by a check or cash. How much is each kiss worth? Are different kisses worth different amounts? Like a peck, how much is that worth versus a long slow French kiss? Does it lose value if it's too messy or does it *gain* value? What if I kiss your hand? Or neck? What if it's a hickey leaving kiss? How much is that one worth?"

Johnny shut his eyes listening to Daniel ramble as he tried to figure out the worth of a kiss and how much he owed Johnny in back pay, adding and subtracting from that billion.

Daniel whined that he'd never be out of this debt.

"At the amount of debt I owe my ghost is going to still be in kissing debt."

Johnny laughed softly.

Daniel shifted forward and Johnny opened his eyes as Daniel leaned into the tub to kiss him.

"My kisses will start losing value, you'll get sick of them," he complained.

He looked a little stressed, trying to find the value of kisses.

"Impossible," Johnny breathed into the kiss.

"Johnny I gotta pay you actual currency," Daniel said pulling away slightly. "For one, our taxes and possibly our insurance would be a nightmare. And I'd have to have an awkward conversation with Jimmy but I don't know if that'd make one of us a prostitute or not."

"Kissing isn't sex," Johnny said amused. "Not how that works."

"It feels alarmingly close."

"You just don't think you can do it."

"I can do it," Daniel said rising to the challenge. "I just don't think either of us has enough time for over a billion kisses."

"You backing out of our deal?"

"Never," Daniel said kissing him again, his hand going to the other side of the tub to balance himself.

"Hey, clothes are in the wash. Here's something to sleep in for-" Bobby said before stopping in the doorway. "Johnny."

Johnny felt himself flush bright red and grabbed the curtain pulling it shut.

Bobby burst out laughing.

"What kind of reaction is that?" he asked. "Dude the karate tournaments all have locker room showers and we went to the same school for 4 years. With the same gym class. The same after-school classes and clubs in the same locker rooms. I've probably seen your dick more than Daniel has."

"I don't think you're helping," Daniel said bitterly.

"Hey don't give me that look. You've known him for like a year and a half or something and have been dating for *almost* half a year? I'm assuming compared to four years plus tournaments, that you haven't made it to the same amount yet."

Johnny didn't have to see Daniel's face to know Bobby was making it worse.

"Besides, he's sitting in a way where you can't even see anything," Bobby said and it sounded like he was coming closer. "Clothes are on the sink, Johnny."

"Thanks," Johnny said.

He heard the door shut as Bobby left.

"I'm going to get out and go to bed," Johnny said.

He didn't hear Daniel budge.

No movement.

He carefully pulled open the curtain.

Daniel was still sitting there, looked like he was patiently waiting.

Damnit, Bobby.

"I will splash you with water," Johnny said.

Daniel just grinned at him, like he didn't care.

Johnny sighed flicking him with water.

"At least hand me a towel will you?"

Daniel got up and grabbed Johnny's towel, one of three on the back of the door.

Johnny took it, draining the tub and wrapping it around his waist as he stepped out of the shower, kissing Daniel. Moving him back against the wall near the sink, grabbing his clothes while he did so.

It was a little awkward but he managed to keep Daniel distracted with kissing.

He pulled away to put his shirt on.

Daniel blinked at him taking in Johnny, fully dressed, hanging up his towel.

"How?"

"Misdirect, lesson one of magic," Johnny said

"Wait, so you actually know magic tricks?" Daniel asked following him closely out the door, grabbing a jar of the green stuff Johnny had forgotten about.

"A few tricks."

"I wanna see 'em."

"Good luck with that," Dutch said from the kitchen.

He grabbed his glass of water and followed them

"Wait why?"

"He doesn't do his tricks very often. Says he's out of practice."

"Said the same thing about surfing, but he still surfed," Daniel said thoughtfully as they opened the door to their room.

The guys were sitting on the floor and Johnny walked to his side of the bed.

He'd bought a bedside table.

A small one for his book, a lamp, and his bonsai.

He gently ran his fingers on the outside of the pot before sitting down on the bed listening to Dutch and Daniel talk about things Johnny knew how to do but didn't share. The guys adding the other things they knew, comparing notes.

Johnny pulled back the blankets and curled up.

"Wait!" Daniel said, hurrying over. "We got to put the stuff on your neck."

Johnny frowned, rolling onto his back with a huff.

"It helps, you *know* it helps," Daniel said sitting down next to him. "You going to be okay?"

Johnny sighed, tilting his chin up.

He heard Daniel flick the jar open and then the cold feeling of the paste on his neck over the spot that hurt, the burning bruise.

"Mr. Miyagi said to rub this one in," Daniel said softly. "So please hang in there."

He was gentle, massaging the cool green paste onto his neck. Johnny waited patiently until he pulled away.

Daniel was all tense, holding his breath, and let out a sigh when he was done recapping the container.

He leaned back over Johnny and kissed him.

"Good job."

It didn't seem like a big deal to lay there and let someone else rub in medicine, but it did help. The guys were doing rock paper scissors on the floor. Tommy cheered coming over and gently scooting Johnny into the middle of the bed.

Wherever they ended up going next, they would need a bigger bed.

Daniel had a look in his eyes like he wanted to protest, but he didn't, instead just grabbed his stuff to go change.

Bobby was talking about how his little siblings had bolted, were at some friend's house. Some friend whose parents didn't let them have sugar and had some vegetable garden. Dutch was laughing and saying it was their loss, more for them, forgetting every year before the amount of sweets Mr. and Mrs. Brown always thought they could handle and never could. Forgetting the first year where they'd ended up crashing from their sugar high and laid out in the garden sick. Listening to them talk until the bed dipped on his other side and the lights turned out and he felt Daniel's lips on his forehead before finally falling asleep.

Lemon Pie War

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daniel woke up to Johnny's nightmare and felt his heart sink, wrapping himself closer to him, a soothing whisper in his ear, that he was okay, safe in Daniel's arms. The guys had done rock paper scissors before bed and on the other side was Tommy who also seemed to have woken up.

The fast heartbeat Daniel had felt under his hands and the panicked breath relaxed and Daniel sighed, breathing into him.

"Nightmare?" Tommy whispered.

"Yeah."

"Kreese probably right?"

"Probably," Daniel said running his fingers through Johnny's hair.

"That's something that I've thought about over and over again and it's never made any sense to me," Tommy said.

"What?"

"Why Johnny?"

"What do you mean?"

Tommy pushed himself up turning to face Daniel.

"Kreese made it seem like he did what he did because Johnny lost. But, he got second place. Technically kind of, Bobby got third. The rest of us didn't even place. So why Johnny? It's not like Johnny hadn't lost before. He's got various other second place wins, other first-place wins, third and no place wins from over the years at other tournaments. Sure he'd mostly been winning lately and he beat himself up pretty badly when he lost, but Kreese didn't. So why was it the All-Valley that made him snap? Why Johnny? Why not any of the rest of us? I mean you and Johnny didn't get along over Ali. But you were nothing to Kreese. Except that Mr. Miyagi protected you in a fight and beat the five of us. So why did he care? Why didn't he try to

kill like Jimmy or I or Dutch? Or Bobby for quitting before the rest of us? It wasn't the second place that made everyone leave, it was him trying to kill Johnny. But why Johnny?"

"Because it *was* Johnny," Bobby's soft voice came from the floor.

"What do you mean?"

Bobby sighed sitting up.

"Do you remember all the times when we were younger and Johnny would come in with a black eye or a busted lip or just beaten up?"

"Yeah."

"And Kreese at first would demand he tell us who did it. All this bullshit about how if one of us was hurt it was like the whole class had been hurt. Like it was an affront on him personally."

"So?"

"Johnny never said who did it."

"Wait so you think-?" Jimmy asked. "That's fucked up."

"It makes sense," Dutch said quietly.

"I don't follow," Daniel said.

"He's saying that because Johnny didn't speak up all those years ago he thought he could get away with it. That even doing it in front of witnesses, it wouldn't come back to him because Johnny got hurt by other people all the time and never tattled. Even though everyone in that parking lot saw him do it. He knew Johnny wouldn't-" Jimmy's quiet voice sounding pissed.

"Not just that," Bobby said. "I think he knew about Sid. Think about it. None of us had a home life like that. He put his hands on us our parents would've taken their money and pummeled him into the ground or locked him up. Even if we'd tried to hide it. They'd have made a big deal over it. Any of the other parents in the dojo. If Johnny had mentioned it to Sid...Sid wouldn't have cared. He knew Johnny wouldn't fight back because he cared too much about what Kreese thought of him even when he didn't agree. He knew Johnny wouldn't tell anyone or press charges. And he knew Johnny's guardians wouldn't come after him. It's why he took it out on Johnny."

"He didn't account for Ms. Lawrence though," Tommy said softly.

"Or us," Dutch said.

Once upon a time that tone nearly sent Daniel into a panic. Had freaked him out because it reminded him of the past. But this time he agreed with it. Silver, Barnes, and Kreese made him nervous but he was pissed. And he wasn't the only one pissed.

"Johnny's up to something for sure," Bobby said after a moment. "He's got something planned."

"How do you know?" Daniel asked.

"He called someone, or a couple of someones as soon as you two go home."

"Do you know who?"

"No, I tried calling back the last number but the person who answered didn't say a word and hung up on me," Bobby said.

"Weird," Tommy said.

"I'm dying of curiosity. But we didn't tell him anything, so knowing him he's not going to want to bother us with it," Bobby sighed.

Daniel saw him flop back onto his back.

It was grey out, he looked at the clock, almost 5 am.

"We're not running this morning right?" Daniel asked.

"Right," Dutch said.

"Then back to sleep," Daniel said softly, laying down again, pressing his forehead back into Johnny's back.

They ended up all piling into Dutch's van to go back to the Browns.

Johnny looked better than he had the night before. Better than he had in the bath. There'd been a moment where there'd been a tremor in his voice and he was so relieved he'd gone in to check on him. His skin had been bright pink and Daniel didn't know if it'd been from the heat of the water or what, but it'd made him worried. Worried that Johnny

had come close to fainting from the heat. But his skin hadn't been too hot when he'd washed his back.

But he seemed calm, holding Daniel's hand.

Jessica was in the kitchen when they arrived at the Browns.

Her hair was up and she grinned when they came in.

"Ready Bobby?"

"Yes," He said rolling up his sleeves and heading into the kitchen.

"Can I work on our costumes?" Johnny asked.

"Yup," Bobby said waving him off.

"I'll be okay," Johnny said softly kissing Daniel's cheek, letting go of his hand, and walking off into the house.

Daniel looked out after him, wanting to follow, but he found himself pulled by the guys to the counter in the kitchen, sitting on a stool.

It'd been a while since he'd visited the Browns.

Their house was decorated for Halloween with spiderwebs and fake bloody handy prints and spooky flickering electric candles.

Mr. and Mrs. Brown walked in.

"Are you two ready?" Mr. Brown said.

"Yes," Jessica and Bobby said.

"Then....Three. Two. One. Go," Mrs. Brown said with a grin clicking a stopwatch.

"What's happening?" Daniel asked.

"They got into an argument when we went dancing about pie. So they're baking pie," Jimmy said.

"Some Ohio pie," Dutch said. "I think they're fighting over lemon pies."

"Skeleton cookie?" Mr. Brown asked offering a plateful of what looked like gingerbread cookies decorated to look like skeletons.

Daniel took one.

"Thanks."

"You should make one of your Mom's pies for Mr. and Mrs. Brown," Tommy said.

"What?" Daniel said with a mouth full of gingerbread.

"Daniel's Mom has an award-winning pie recipe," Tommy said turning to the Browns.

"Oh really?" Mrs. Brown said curiously.

"It's a blueberry pie, that's her best one," Daniel said.

"Well, you should make it too."

"It's really better when she makes it."

"But you remember the recipe right?" Dutch asked.

"Well yeah."

Jimmy leaned over, dropping his voice low.

"If they like it they might ask your Mom if they can buy the recipe from her. Or offer her a job baking it."

Daniel blinked, he didn't know if that was something his mom would like, but it'd be nice to give her a route back to LA.

"Uh, do you have blueberries?'

"Of course," Mrs. Brown said leading him to the other kitchen.

It was also decorated for as well with pumpkins set out and the cake plates swapped for ghoulish skeleton hands and severed hands holding up the plates.

"Make yourself at home."

"Thank you," Daniel said looking around.

There were so many cupcakes under the domes on the cake plates. Ghost toppings, some that looked like they were bleeding, and one with little candy witch's feet sticking out of it.

He heard footsteps and saw Johnny.

He stopped, looking at Daniel.

He was covered in flour and his face was painted white.

"What are you doing?" Johnny asked.

"Making Ma's blueberry pie. Did you use *all* of the flour on yourself?"

"No," Johnny said. "Do you need the cheesecloth?"

"No," Daniel said amused watching as Johnny pulled a large roll of cheesecloth out of a cabinet, grabbing a pair of scissors and sitting at the counter going to work.

Daniel watched him for a moment, he was so focused.

He had to pay attention.

This could get his Ma out of Jersey. Maybe. Though she might not leave uncle Louie while he was sick and on his own.

He went to work making dough and flouring the counter. He worked the flour in before separating it into two balls and putting it in the fridge.

He cleaned up and moved onto the filling glancing at Johnny who had draped himself in white cheesecloth and was applying black lipstick to his mouth.

No fake teeth outlined around his lips this time.

He had a mirror and was looking at it with a frown.

"What?" Daniel asked.

"I'm not sure if it looks better with the black or if the white looked better," Johnny said thoughtfully.

Daniel set the blueberries he'd gotten out of the fridge down and walked over.

He leaned over Johnny.

Johnny leaned back away from him.

Daniel frowned.

"You will smudge it," Johnny said.

"I can be careful."

Johnny gave him a look like he doubted that but he leaned forward again, meeting Daniel in a kiss.

Daniel pulled away with a grin, no smudge.

"Told you."

Johnny picked up the mirror and turned it to face Daniel.

Daniel had a bit of lipstick smeared on his lips. He laughed softly.

"Okay, well, you look fine still," Daniel said trying to wipe it off of his lips.

"You're just making it worse, hold on," Johnny said grabbing a cloth, wetting it, and gently holding Daniel's chin in one hand and gently rubbing his lips with the cloth in the other.

It got rid of the lipstick but it didn't help the root of the problem.

Daniel wanted to kiss him again.

"There, you're good now," Johnny said setting the cloth aside.

He picked up the lipstick again, swiping his pinky across the top and dabbing it under his eyes making them black, then mixing it with white so it faded into grey on the outside.

Daniel turned, going back to his pie.

He focused on the filling, mixing blueberries, sugar, and all of his mother's secret additions.

He remembered her teaching him as a kid, making it together every blueberry season.

The fact she'd written out the recipe for Johnny warmed his heart.

He wanted to cook with her again. Missed it.

"Do you think," Johnny began slowly.

Daniel glanced up from the pie filling he was working on.

"Yeah?

"You'd be willing to tell me about Silver?"

"I-"

"If you don't feel up for it I understand. But you interacted with him the most out of everyone. I know his goal is to reopen Cobra Kai, and he thinks you're the reason it closed. Or that by defeating you it'll give the dojo enough of a boost to reopen and make it, I don't know, a franchise or something. I just want to know so I can be prepared."

Daniel shuddered.

Once Silver's mask had been off it'd been ***off***.

The things that sent off alarm bells became sirens in Daniel's head.

All the excuses he'd made for the man had crumbled to dust under that devilish laugh, the crowing at their discomfort and Daniel's fear.

He pulled the pie dough out of the fridge and went to work rolling it out, adding flour to keep it from sticking to the counter or the rolling pin.

He started slow.

Told Johnny about meeting Terry Silver in the garden, how he'd known about Mr. Miyagi serving in the 442nd. Knew about all these things, hadn't really talked to Daniel. Had said Kreese was dead. That Kreese had planned to come and apologize.

"I saw both of them. I should've mentioned it. I told Mr. Miyagi about Silver, but it wasn't enough."

Daniel's hands froze over the crust.

"What?"

"When we got back from Okinawa I saw Kreese at the airport. We were arriving, he was leaving."

Daniel remembered Johnny suddenly not being with them. The deer in headlights look he had, all tense and pale holding that whale shark, and having to go back and get him.

He'd never asked what made Johnny stop. Just thought he'd gotten

overwhelmed at being home. About possibly going back to the mansion. Something Daniel had started to try and figure out how to avoid. A split-second thought of asking his mom if Johnny could stay with them.

"And then you were going out one night to meet with Jessica and I fell asleep in the garden. I woke up and there was a man in the house. Tall, wearing dark clothes, going through Mr. Miyagi's stuff. That's how he got the shop's address I think. How he knew about it. How he knew about the 442nd. You just missed him, coming out of the shower. He climbed into the fireplace when Mr. Miyagi came home. I thought it was a dream. But I found his footprint on the ground so I told the guys, I told Mr. Miyagi. I told everyone when we were passing out flyers. *Be careful there's a tall man breaking into houses with a slicked-back ponytail.* When you woke me up you looked rattled, a little scared, and well that night you ran into Barnes for the first time. I didn't want to scare you more by saying someone had also broken into the house."

Daniel remembered for practically months the way Johnny would stop at the fireplace, grab a poker and poke around in it, searching for something.

They rarely used it so Daniel assumed he'd heard a raccoon or a bird in there.

Something normal.

Not Terry Silver hiding in their fireplace.

That-

That was terrifying.

No wonder Johnny had been so adamant about security.

"He broke into the house?" Daniel asked, hands shaking.

Johnny got up, walking over to him and taking his hands in his.

"Yeah."

Daniel told Johnny about Silver.

About how he just kept showing up.

How he had to have been stalking Daniel because it was too frequent.

Which meant he was *watching* Daniel, *following him*. Because it kept happening.

How he lied about things like he wanted to make Daniel second guess himself.

But how most of the time Dutch was there to point out the lies. Or it was too obvious, like the dance. Impossible for Daniel to have told Silver where they were going when the only one who'd known was Dutch.

"That was the creep who was watching us dance," Johnny said softly.

Daniel nodded, telling him about the Quicksilver method, about the conversation he'd had with Ms. Lawrence.

Johnny gently rubbed his fingers over his knuckles.

It was like once he started talking about it he couldn't stop talking. About all the alarm bells. About how he'd try to warm up with kata and Silver would yell at him. How he'd tell Silver the same thing every time.

He would stretch by himself, didn't need help.

He was so used to Mr. Miyagi being hands-off.

That learning with Mr. Miyagi was like an independent study until it came time to learn kata or to put it all together.

And Silver was hands-on.

Adjusting Daniel's stance with his hands on his hips and he didn't know if that was normal or-

"It depends, but if you were uncomfortable," Johnny said lifting his gauzy arms to wrap them around Daniel. "Then it wasn't okay."

He looked pissed.

His words and his tone were soft and gentle, but he looked pissed on Daniel's behalf. Daniel breathed a shaky breath and sighed, pressing his cheek into Johnny's chest.

"If you want to study together, we'll have Dutch chaperone," Johnny said softly.

Daniel laughed.

"Yeah, we need a chaperone."

"What do you want to do?" Johnny asked.

Daniel pulled back a little.

Johnny was all wrapped up in the white cheesecloth.

"It might be fun to get you out of all of this," Daniel said tugging on it trying to figure out where it started and ended.

He made the prettiest damn ghost he'd ever seen.

"I meant about Silver and the tournament," Johnny said, carefully prying the cheesecloth out of his fingers.

"I mean we could-just a little."

"Not in the Brown's kitchen," Johnny said. "There are possibly two small children who are quiet on their feet around here. I'm not scaring them."

Daniel huffed out a sigh.

"I'm going to compete and beat Barnes and get them out of our lives. I want them gone."

"Then you focus on preparing for the tournament and I'll handle everything else," Johnny said lifting his hands to the side of Daniel's face.

"Like what?" Daniel asked.

"Making sure they *let you* compete. Paperwork. And revenge."

He made it sound like he was offering ideas for what they were going to have for dinner.

Easy.

"That sounds like a lot," Daniel said.

"I've got plenty of time on my hands," Johnny said.

"And they're nice hands, even covered in flour," Daniel said amused.

"Oh shit, right," Johnny said letting go of Daniel's hand and looking for that cloth again to wipe Daniel off.

Daniel laughed softly as Johnny dusted flour off of him.

"Might be the messiest costume I've ever seen. But you're still gorgeous."

His ears were red, the only way under all that makeup that Daniel knew he'd gotten through, made Johnny blush.

"I'll figure something out. This is just a prototype," Johnny said gently wiping flour off of Daniel's cheeks.

Daniel smiled, turning back to his pie when Johnny was done.

He put it in the pie pan, filled it with the filling, and went to work designing the top.

He finished his latticework and stuck it in the oven.

He cleaned up again and then sat on the stool next to where Johnny had returned to looking thoughtfully in the mirror again.

"After Halloween, and your Mom's party," Daniel began.

"Yeah?" Johnny asked turning back to him.

"I want to claim my win," Daniel said hooking his leg around Johnny's.

Johnny looked at him for a moment, then leaned towards him.

"The bike race?"

"Yes."

"Well, what do you want?"

Daniel grinned.

"You'll see, just that first weekend in November, have nothing planned. No babysitting, no volunteering, no guys. Just you and me."

"Is that your request?"

"Nope, it's the precursor."

"I don't think that's what the agreement was exactly," Johnny said

amused. "But okay."

Daniel smiled. He was looking forward to it. He had plans. A couple of different plans.

"Pie's going to take about 40 minutes. I'm going to take this," Daniel held up a timer that looked like a box. "So do you want to go see the other pie competition? Theirs should be done soon. Also aren't we supposed to be eating treats? Taste-testing?"

"Yeah. But feel free to turn down things. The Browns are overwhelming with their food taste testing."

"I'm from an Italian family in Jersey I think I can handle it."

Johnny gave him a look that made Daniel feel like he'd uttered famous last words.

He unhooked his legs from Johnny's and headed with him back to the other kitchen.

Arguing was not what he expected. But it's what he found.

Jessica was pulling her pie from the oven and set it out to cool.

"It's *boring*," Jessica said leaning against the counter taking off her oven mitts. "It's 90% meringue. How is that good? It's like air. There's nothing to it."

"And who wants to eat a whole slice of lemon?" Bobby asked motioning to her pie. "The pith is bitter. No one likes eating the pith."

"Right on time," Dutch said. "Nice ghost costume, I see what you meant."

"Are you covered in flour?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah, I still need to figure that out."

"Arts and Craft store," Tommy said. "We can get glittery grey spray paint or something, spray at a distance and it should do the same look."

"Perfect," Johnny said taking a seat on one of the empty stools next to him.

"So what's with the lemon pie war?" Daniel asked.

"So at the dance, Bobby asked Jessica if Ohio had any famous foods," Jimmy said.

"And she said they have good lemon pie," Tommy said.

"And he said *Oh like meringue* and apparently she *hates* meringue," Dutch said.

"So they decided they'd both make their favorite lemon pies and make everyone try it to get other people's opinions. So since this is also the Halloween taste test for the bakery we figured it'd be a good time." Johnny said softly. "For them to compete."

"It just has to cool," Jessica said with a smile. "And then they'll know that they've been eating awful meringue all their lives when they could've been having *real* lemon pie."

"They're going to hate the lemon slices. The point of a lemon pie is the flavor of the lemon. Not actually putting lemons in it," Bobby said. "That's too much."

"Scared of a real lemon Bobby Brown?" Jessica asked.

"Not a chance Jessica Andrews."

"Ghost cookie?" Mr. Brown asked.

"Right, Halloween taste testing, sorry Mom, Dad," Bobby said putting his pie aside to cool and taking off his oven mitts.

"No, this is fun," Mrs. Brown said with a laugh.

"Frankenstein's monster bar?"

"Oh, honey don't forget the grave parfaits."

"Oh right."

Before Daniel knew it a large pile of sweet treats was set in front of him. No end in sight. Like he'd walked into the witch's house from Hansel and Gretel.

"Make sure to drink water," Johnny said softly.

"Yeah," Daniel said eyes wide at all of it.

They'd even made their own little candy lollipops shaped like different

monsters and severed limbs.

"Halloween and Valentine's Day are pretty intense around here."

"And winter," Dutch said. "They like making gingerbread houses. And not like gingerbread houses that are normal. Nah. Last year it was a to-scale model of Paris."

"After a delightful wedding anniversary trip to Paris," Mrs. Brown said fondly.

"And before that, it was a scene from storybooks. The boys requested those," Mr. Brown said with a smile.

"The boys?" Daniel asked.

"Us," Tommy said. "But mostly Johnny. We'd come every winter before the holidays and help them build their gingerbread houses. The first year we did it, we were all shit at it."

"Except Johnny."

"He's got an artist streak," Mr. Brown said fondly.

"That's what I'm learning," Daniel said smiling, taking Johnny's hand in his.

Daniel tried to pace himself trying all the treats, giving Mr. and Mrs. Brown the best feedback he could. But after a while, it all tasted the exact same. Sweet.

"I think it's time to try our pie then," Jessica said cutting slices and setting it out in front of each of them.

"You know, be honest right?" Bobby said.

"Yeah man, we're not scared of hurting your feelings by saying hers is better," Dutch said.

"Hey!" Bobby said. "You should be a *little* concerned about my feelings."

Johnny laughed softly.

"I'm sure they're both great."

"But you gotta pick one," Bobby said.

"I want to split mine, who wants to split mine?" Johnny asked.

"Me," Daniel said, he didn't think he could eat more than a bite of each anyway.

The rinds of Jessica's pie weren't as hard as he expected.

It was light and the crust was flaky.

A perfect palate cleanser.

But Bobby's pie was also good and Daniel liked meringue.

He held the fork between his lips unable to choose, turning to Johnny.

Johnny was unreadable.

Daniel didn't have a clue which one he'd pick.

He turned to look at the other guys, at the Browns, each trying the pies.

Bobby and Jessica cut another slice and traded.

He watched them try to school their features.

They turned their backs to one another and it was clear they both liked the other's pie. Which made sense.

Bobby grew up with baked goods and Jessica was a good cook.

He'd just say it.

"I like both of them," Daniel said. "Jessica's is different, never had one like it, but it's good and I like the crust, but I also like meringue and that's probably the best meringue I've ever had."

"I agree," Johnny said, setting his fork down.

"Well, that's taking the *easy* route. You're supposed to pick one," Bobby complained.

"Admit that you like Jessica's pie and that she's a good cook and Jessica can admit she likes your meringue and that you're a good baker and we can all say thank you for this wonderful experiment," Johnny said. "I'm not going to pick one."

"You're always like this," Bobby complained.

"Not always. I will tell you that if Daniel's pie, which," Johnny picked up the little timer box. "Is almost done, was part of the competition I'd pick his."

"What but it's not even done!" Jessica said.

"I'd pick it because he's my boyfriend and I know his mother's baking is wonderful and I already have had her blueberry pie which Daniel made. I like everything he makes, so he always wins first place."

"That is nepotism," Jimmy said around a mouthful of pie.

The box popped open and a little skeleton popped out with a cackle.

"I'll go grab my pie," Daniel said.

"Need help?" Johnny asked.

"Nope," Daniel said.

He grinned as he hurried down the hall to the other kitchen. He liked that he won first place no matter what. That Johnny liked his cooking and his baking. Liked that Johnny picked him. The way he'd said it, so soft and fond. Like it was an irrevocable fact.

Though he didn't think he could eat any more sugar. Not even his own pie. Which was disappointing.

He actually was looking forward to whatever health food Jessica and Dutch had picked out for their morning run the following day.

It looked good when he opened the oven and he felt a pang.

He missed his mom. Uncle Louie wasn't doing great. No one else was there to help out. So she was stuck.

He'd started the conversation multiple times and always stopped.

Ma, I miss you, can you come back to LA? Why'd you leave without me? I mean I wouldn't have left, but I would've liked to have talked about it. Did you have to leave? Couldn't we have found another option? You were supposed to be here. You promised you'd never leave me after dad died. You promised it was you and me forever. That we'd have each other's backs. And I know I didn't talk to you about everything. It's been really rough without you. I miss you.

He carefully pulled out the pie and set it on the stovetop. It looked good. Perfectly golden.

He took a shaky breath.

Would you have known Silver was bad?

He hadn't even opened that can of worms with his mom yet. Hadn't told her about training or the tournament.

He'd waited to tell her last time too, but this was different.

Part of him was happy she wasn't there.

She was safe.

The thought of Mike Barnes or Silver terrorizing his mother made him sick. But he also wanted her there.

He sighed carrying the pie out of the other kitchen and setting it down on a cooling tray.

Mr. and Mrs. Brown were around him suddenly popping up on either side leaning forward, inspecting his pie.

"Crust looks good," Mr. Brown said.

"I like how you did the lattice Daniel," Mrs. Brown said.

"Smells divine."

They waited, impatiently.

Daniel didn't think he'd ever seen two adults stare at a pie so intensely.

They were talking about it like they were trying to guess what made it smell exactly the way it did like they were trying to pry his mother's recipe out of the pie just my scent.

Daniel sat down next to Johnny who gently took his hand.

"You know, I've never seen my parents so excited over someone else's pie," Bobby said, hand coming to Daniel's shoulder.

"Yeah, they said they liked mine but that was completely different. If I had hadn't, how many was it? Four graveyard parfaits? I would be

ecstatic to try that pie," Jessica said.

"You ate four of the graveyard parfaits?" Daniel asked.

"There were four different flavors," Jessica said. "I had to. Now I'm hoping I can take a slice of your blueberry pie home with me. Maybe two slices, one for my aunt."

Johnny's arm moved to wrap around his waist, pulling Daniel in close.

"His mom won an award for that pie recipe."

"Really?" Jessica asked. "That's so cool Daniel."

"Yeah," Daniel said leaning back against Johnny. "I miss her."

"You'll see her again soon I'm sure," Johnny said softly.

Daniel sighed.

He liked how sure Johnny sounded, but he knew his Mom wasn't leaving Jersey for a long time.

His best bet was to go to Jersey for Thanksgiving or Christmas, but he didn't want to leave Johnny and he was also pretty sure Johnny's mom wouldn't be comfortable with him leaving the first year they were both free.

He didn't want to leave them either.

LA felt more like home than Jersey did now.

Johnny felt like home.

And he couldn't just up and leave when Kreese was out there *and* Silver *and* Barnes.

"Breathe," Johnny whispered in his ear and Daniel shivered.

Apartment.

They had to get an apartment as soon as the tournament was over.

"Daniel this is delightful," Mrs. Brown said, holding her plate of pie.

"Please give us your mother's number," Mr. Brown said pushing a piece of paper across to him with a pen.

Daniel took in a deep breath and let it out writing down uncle Louie's number.

"She's uh, taking care of my uncle right now."

"We'll figure something out. But this is delicious," Mr. Brown said pointing at the pie with his fork.

"Oh! Round two?" Mrs. Brown asked turning towards a cabinet and pulling out a cake.

Daniel leaned heavily back against Johnny inwardly groaning.

He was going to die.

How had Bobby survived living in a castle made of sugar?

Johnny laughed softly and it tickled the back of his head.

"It's why you gotta say no to some of it. This is endurance, not a race."

"I now know for next time," Daniel said with a sigh.

Chapter End Notes

Ohio Lemon pie
Lemon meringue pie
Blueberry pie inspo
Gingerbread skeletons

7 ghosts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Halloween had arrived and his mother might have gone overboard.

She'd decorated the house in spiderwebs and pumpkins for the party.

She'd even gotten king-size candy bars in case any kids came trick or treating. She kept trying to stick some of them into Johnny's bag. To take a few home with him.

She hired a bartender to work on bubbling punch and alcoholic cocktails out in the garden and got cupcakes and sweets from the Browns and a catering company had made themed finger food.

They sat in her kitchen with newspaper down carving pumpkins, they had hours before the party, while catering and party planners set up outside.

Johnny was already dressed up, he was going to do the guy's make-up when they arrived in a couple of hours.

He wasn't sure if he was also doing Jessica's.

"So you're a ghost?" she asked.

She was dressed up in striped baggy clothes with a red sash around her waist and a blue coat.

She also had a red floppy hat.

She almost looked like a pirate.

"I am and who are you?" he asked.

"Jeanne Baret. She disguised herself as a man to study botany and is considered the first woman to have circumnavigated the globe," Laura said popping a piece of pumpkin out with her fingers.

"Think you're going to study botany ?"

"I've thought about it. But I've been talking to Lucille a lot and I think it'd be nice to do something that would've helped me before."

"Like what?"

"Some sort of resource for single parents or guardians trying to do it on their own and struggling. Like free childcare and just, building a safety net. The neighborhood where your shop is, it's a very nice neighborhood. It has a good community. I was thinking of paying them like a grant to babysit kids through lessons. Gardening at the garden shop, meditation and about trees at your shop, pottery with Earthworks. Stuff like that. Provide snacks. It's more of a sketch of an idea than a real one."

"It sounds nice Mom. I'm sure Mr. Miyagi would like it."

"Not Daniel huh?"

Johnny frowned.

He didn't know.

He hadn't seen Daniel with kids that often. He'd been good dancing with kids in Okinawa but they'd mostly hung out with Kumiko.

He carefully sliced through his pumpkin and shrugged.

"Don't know. I'll ask him."

They continued carving and he tried to remember the last time they'd carved pumpkins together.

He had to have been really young, maybe back when the florist was open, that first apartment.

They hadn't been able to afford them after it had closed, and then when she married Sid, he paid someone to carve pumpkins.

He remembered the first year his mom recommended they do it as a fun family activity and Sid had wrinkled his nose, saying it was gross and why do it when they could hire people to do it?

But it was nice. Nice to sit with her and listen to her ideas and just enjoy her home. To see her decorate the way she liked, to finally have the chance to be herself again. And he knew it was taking time. Time to get used to who Laura Lawrence was again.

He was sure it was an adjustment.

Not to have people making her egg white breakfasts and freshly

squeezed orange juice and carrying it out to wherever she was.

No one to remind her of her plans.

No place she had to be unless she wanted to.

It was like they were in the same spot. It was kind of weird. She could do anything she wanted and so could he. A crossroads for both of them.

She seemed to him to be thriving and it was nice.

"I heard from Gabriella you met Terry Silver," she said sticking her thumb against the side of her pumpkin and sending another piece flying.

"Uh, yeah," Johnny said.

She really was like a big sister, tattling on him and everything.

"Why didn't you mention it?"

"I'm working on it."

"That doesn't explain *why* you didn't mention it."

"I've already- It was sudden okay? Daniel was learning from him and-"

"Of course that was the fucking bastard bothering Daniel," she said sourly.

"See! No one told me that, so it was more of a rush to get Daniel out of there," Johnny said. "And then he freaked out and I freaked out and we're finally finding our footing again."

"You freaked out because?" she asked looking at him with a frown

He hadn't told her.

Didn't know how to tell her that Kreese had tried to kill him again.

He'd avoided her until the bruising healed.

She was finally happy. He didn't want to make her unhappy again.

He didn't want to worry her.

But he couldn't lie to her either.

"Because Kreese was there," Johnny said softly. "Hiding behind his damn cardboard cut out."

Her hand grabbed his and it was goopy with pumpkin.

"Did he-?"

Johnny couldn't meet her eyes and she stood up suddenly.

She was still holding her carving knife.

"He's a fucking bastard! How dare he try not just once but twice? I have half a mind to-"

"Mom, please put the knife down."

She blinked, stopped, laughed, and set it down.

"Take murder off of the table Mom."

"I didn't *say* it was on the table."

"It's in your look."

"Honey."

"You just got free from Sid and now you want to end up in jail?"

"They might not catch me," she said thoughtfully. "I've been reading a lot of murder mysteries. Tommy recommended them."

"Then you know that they're *fiction*. That they almost always catch the murderer and it all ties up neatly at the end of the story. You'd be on the run forever, *Tell-Tale Heart* and all."

She sighed sinking heavily back into her seat. Then sitting up suddenly and leaning towards him.

"You said you're working on it. You're planning something."

"I am. Daniel wants to compete. So my plan is for after."

"Can I help?"

"I mean you've got a part, for sure."

"And I don't even have to audition?" she asked hand to her chest with a look of fake surprise.

"I've been told I have a problem with nepotism, so no," Johnny said with an amused smile.

She laughed, "Okay, sounds great. As long as they're both out and that justice is served."

"With a big helping of revenge," Johnny said carefully prying out the last carved piece of his pumpkin.

"Mr. Miyagi is okay with this?" she asked raising her eyebrow. "He seems like a water and duck person."

"He doesn't know. Only necessary individuals are aware at the moment. Need to know basis."

"Daniel?" She asked returning to her pumpkin.

"Knows that I'm planning something."

"How many moving pieces are in this plan?" she asked glancing at the book he'd brought with him sitting on the coffee table. "This doesn't include faking your death to get out of prison does it?"

"No, of course not!"

"Just checking."

They moved on to safer subjects, finishing up their pumpkins and putting candles in them by the time the guys and Jessica arrived.

It was going to be weird for her to be gone in three weeks.

No longer part of their group, no longer a head of bright red curly hair amongst the guys.

Johnny knew he wasn't the only one who'd asked her if she really had to go.

He knew the guys had offered to come down to Ohio if that boyfriend gave her any trouble.

If he made her cry they'd be there in a heartbeat.

Johnny had asked her if she could stay until after the tournament, but she shook her head, lamenting it.

Told him at one of their café dates how much it sucked to have helped

Daniel train and not get to see the results.

Her family was expecting her.

She had grabbed his arm so fiercely, leaning in close.

"You have to call me and tell me what happens. Promise me. As soon as possible. All the details."

He'd promised. And he'd keep that promise.

He did their makeup when they arrived, it was similar to the skeleton look from the year prior, but no painted on teeth. He tried for something more ethereal.

Doing Jessica's makeup was harder than he thought it'd be. The guy knew to sit still. But she'd turn and start talking to one of the guys or his mom and she just wouldn't sit still. He definitely got make-up on her ear three times. But eventually, she was done and she got up, spinning happily in her grey and white clothes.

The guys were talking about all the fun stuff at school.

Midnight Halloween movie parties with black and white old films in the auditorium with breakfast thrown by the film club.

A zombie day where the art kids dressed up as zombies and shuffled to class.

It was festive on campus and they were enjoying it.

They had already been to countless Halloween costume parties, wearing the old skeleton costumes around campus, missing the rest of their skeleton crew.

Getting high with philosophy and physicist students and having deep conversations they didn't remember later.

Daniel and Mr. Miyagi arrived when Johnny was finishing Dutch's makeup and he arrived wrapping arms around Johnny, kissing the back of his neck.

When Dutch's was done, the guys left with Jessica to go walk around and eat snacks greeting Daniel warmly but knowing somewhere there was food.

Mr. Miyagi spoke to his mother about the idea she had and Johnny

worked on Daniel's ghost makeup. It was distracting to put anything on Daniel's face. Even if it was a costume. He set the makeup aside and kissed him.

Daniel laughed.

"Aren't you worried about smudging it?"

"I can fix it later," Johnny said kissing him again.

Daniel had won their payment argument.

Not that it was much of an argument.

But he was paying Johnny now. And it was weird. Weird to get a paycheck in his account from Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees. He'd have to do taxes or something. Maybe Daniel could help. Or maybe his Mom had hired someone to do her taxes and she could have them do Johnny's too.

Johnny was setting his paycheck aside for an apartment.

Someplace close to the shop, Mr. Miyagi, and his Mom.

He'd been going out looking when he had free time. Collecting brochures for Daniel to look at.

He didn't want to pick anything that was going to fall apart. Nowhere with too much damage or mold.

Mr. Miyagi had taught him what to look for from when he'd helped at South Seas so now he knew all the signs to look for.

He also wanted to make sure it was a place he could drop a larger deposit on so they wouldn't have to pay as much in monthly bills. He thought that was a possibility anyway and then that would give them more room for Daniel to comfortably contribute. He had a feeling that if he paid for the apartment completely Daniel wouldn't like it.

Daniel pulled away and then broke into a fit of laughter.

"What?"

"You look like a sad clown now."

Johnny sighed.

"Okay, let's go fix this up," he said taking Daniel's hand and leading him down the way to his room, to his en suite bathroom.

He did look a bit like a sad clown when he looked in the mirror.

He washed the paint off his face and he turned to dry off his face, to start over, when Daniel was right in his space, fingers digging under the gauzy cheesecloth and the spray-painted clothing, hand finding his skin, his stomach, his chest, turning them and pinning him to the counter.

"We can lock the door, right? This is your room? Your bathroom? Then it should all be fine right?"

Maybe he'd said no a little more frequently than he usually did, based on the way Daniel was grinding against him like he'd been holding his breath until they'd had a moment alone together. But there had to be boundaries like not the Brown's kitchen or Mr. Miyagi's truck, or the shop while Mr. Miyagi was still there or Jessica was on the way or Mr. Miyagi's shower.

There'd been a lot of nos recently.

They hadn't really had privacy for a while.

Mr. Miyagi seemed extra concerned.

Kept checking in on them.

Daniel had started it. It was his fault even if Johnny wouldn't ever tell him that.

Daniel just burst into Mr. Miyagi's room, or anywhere really to talk to him. And now Mr. Miyagi just opened the door to their room to ask if they were ready for dinner or wanted to play a card game or to study kata, or if they were okay.

Johnny thought it was because they'd both gotten hurt under his watch.

Daniel studying with Mr. Silver, Johnny from Kreese and now he had to check that there weren't any monsters that had popped up in the last five minutes.

It was totally Daniel's fault though for starting it. Not even knocking and walking into Mr. Miyagi's room to tell him dinner was ready.

Finding him just about anywhere to talk about the shop, about how the day had gone, about his conversations with his mom.

To ask Mr. Miyagi what he wanted from the store.

Johnny still knocked. But he was pretty sure he was the only one still knocking on the doors. Now that the discord between Mr. Miyagi and Daniel had healed the boundaries were blurring, which meant nothing was happening.

Just a lot of breathing exercises and kata and showers.

"Yeah."

Daniel grabbed the washcloth from Johnny wiping off his own face, all of Johnny's hard work was gone in an instance but it was fine because he got to see Daniel's face.

The lack of privacy was one of the reasons they'd decided to spend the night with his Mom.

She'd invited them to spend the night. Reminded Johnny that he had a room and they could do breakfast which would be nice.

She said Daniel could spend the night too. That was fine. Then she'd leaned over her red lips curling up in that mischievous look she got sometimes to say "And there are condoms in your bathroom."

He'd nearly left right then from their breakfast date, turning bright red and burying his head in his hands.

"Just please do laundry before you leave," she said with a knowing smile into her coffee.

Her room was on the other end of the house. He had a feeling she'd picked the specific floor plan on purpose. And now that he knew why and that Daniel instantly took that opening, that offering, went straight for it he felt like maybe they were too obvious, too easy to read, and it was embarrassing.

Daniel pulled away to go lock Johnny's bedroom door.

He came back, pulling off his ghost costume, the different layers, and setting it on the chair.

Johnny flicked off the bathroom light, setting his costume carefully aside.

Not moving fast enough from the way Daniel's hands were on him, helping him out of the rest of it, tumbling them onto the bed.

"You remember tomorrow right? No plans all weekend?" Daniel asked.

Johnny blinked. Trying to focus on the conversation and not the hands-on him. He needed to find more apartments to look at fast, or else Daniel was going to take advantage of his mother's open-door policy and she'd just smile into her wine and coffee every time she saw them and he'd die of embarrassment.

"Yeah."

"After work, I'm going to drive us to where we're going."

Where they were going.

So it was a trip.

Daniel hadn't explained anything.

Johnny had tried to think of what Daniel possibly had planned. But he didn't have a clue. He'd have plenty of time to think. He had a feeling he wasn't going to sleep at all that night.

Even though they had a party to get to. touching Daniel was too tempting to avoid, a chance. The opportunity was too good to pass up.

He'd do whatever Daniel wanted on their trip, but not now.

He flipped them over, shifting Daniel under him, enjoying the look on his face, leaning down to kiss him.

He'd try to keep them quiet. There was a party starting outside that door after all.

Getting ready again took a little bit of effort to get the look right but Johnny managed it, reworking their make-up and making sure the ghostly look worked, before unlocking his door and returning with Daniel out to the party.

They got snacks, candied apples, and finger food, mocktails because even though his mom was a cool mom, there were kids at the party, and the person she hired to man the bar was carding with a fierce look in their eyes like they could spot a fake ID a mile away.

Johnny didn't even try, just accepted his dark purple almost black drink and hooked his arm around Daniel.

It looked like they hadn't missed too much. Not his mother's toast at least.

His mother looked happy as she thanked everyone for coming, for her housewarming gifts, for the friendship, for the support through her divorce, and for being there. She turned her glass to Johnny's little group of ghosts, to the guys, and held up her glass smiling warmly in their direction.

"I know you boys have your own families that love you greatly, and for good reason. While over the years we didn't get to spend too much time together, I know from Johnny's stories about your adventures and all the fun and joy you've brought into his life. For that, I'm forever grateful. You even came to me to tell me something was wrong when I hadn't wanted to believe it. Helped me when it wasn't your job or even remotely close to a responsibility you should've even considered. But you did. A divorce isn't easy no matter what, but Sid made it hellish. I do not know what I would've done without you. It wouldn't have been easy for sure. I remember the first time I met the four of you. I went to talk to Johnny and didn't realize the four of you had snuck in. I didn't even know at that point that you **had to** sneak in. But for half a minute I wondered if I'd been gifted four more boys. Like I just hadn't looked close enough and had somehow collected four more without even realizing it. But that's what did happen. Johnny didn't have brothers, not by blood. But he has you and that chosen bond is stronger than anything else. You have grown into fine young men who I'm immensely proud of, as I know your own families are, and I'm grateful we are a part of each other's lives."

He heard the guys sniff, knew if he looked closely he'd see the tracks of tears through their makeup.

When Johnny had been little before Sid the Halloween tradition they had was dressing up and going out trick or treating. He never had any request on what to wear because he knew they couldn't afford to buy him a costume.

He'd looked once in the store, saw how much they were, and never asked.

No superheroes, no monsters, no movie characters.

No costumes made by someone else.

Instead, they went through their closet and went to work.

One year they made his costume out of Papier-mâché, out of old recycled paper and newspaper and they painted it because they'd found the painting kit the couple who owned the florist shop had gotten him when he was younger. They'd been cleaning, downsizing because they had to move and found all the crafting and art supplies they'd given them to keep him entertained in the corner of the shop.

That costume had been his favorite.

They'd worked together to make him a bunny mask because that was the first year where he got to really have a choice.

He'd gotten to hold a bunny in his arms at the petting zoo and the bunny had actually liked him.

His mom said it was because he was so sweet and calm and he'd liked that. Thought that if people didn't like him, at least the bunny had. Saw something good in him.

He liked Halloween over every other holiday because it meant time with his mom, she usually got the evening off and could take him out.

No one bullied him because he could hide behind a mask or behind make up and no one paid attention to him.

And every house, their doors opened and they put candy in his pillowcase. And he and his mom would share on the ride home, when there was a home or in the car when there hadn't been.

They'd gone the first year together after moving in with Sid, before Sid said Johnny was too old. He'd been studying magic that year, so he'd gone as a magician. The first purchased costume he'd ever had, they'd picked it out together.

It had been nice, but it wasn't the same.

He'd missed making them, putting something together.

He realized it wasn't the costume exactly but the time they got to spend together, and that had been one of the warning signs that things were changing. Not just the big house but the loss of their traditions.

Instead, Sid threw parties. And he wore costumes that Sid had someone else pick out for him. Because as Sid had said for years, it

wasn't like he had friends to hang out with, so what did he care?

But when he had made friends, even though they'd been *too old* to go trick or treating they still did. A group costume that Johnny had worked hard to figure out. The five of them sitting on the floor of Bobby's room trying to come up with something and Johnny had put a few things together from Bobby's closet and they'd liked it.

Sure they could've bought something fancy, something modern and new, in style or in fashion, but they'd liked Johnny's design.

He'd been so happy that they'd liked it. So relieved.

It started a new tradition and it made his heart feel full to see them all together still. Like that old tradition had grown and hadn't died like it had felt so many other things had because of Sid, or because of bad luck. And it was a relief to have Daniel at his side, that he hadn't ruined Halloween for him or Mr. Miyagi, that they could still enjoy it together.

Chapter End Notes

> Please use caution when researching Jeanne Baret. I was going to link to some articles but depending on the source, her secret didn't stay a secret for the entirety of her journey, and the content from once she made it to Tahiti and beyond can be triggering. (Be especially careful of the NPR piece) This is why I'm not linking a source this time. It wasn't a peaceful voyage but she did get rewarded with a pension later in her life with a document that regarded her highly for her hard work, botany skills, and for circumnavigating the globe and there is a plant named after her. Inspiration for Laura's outfit is from sketches of Jeanne Baret.

Roots

Daniel couldn't find Johnny.

He wasn't in their bed, which happened sometimes but not often. Usually, Johnny got up second, like his alarm was Daniel.

He wasn't in the garden reading.

He wasn't in the kitchen.

He wasn't anywhere.

Johnny usually told him he was heading out. Would kiss him and let him know he was going somewhere and would see him later or left a note. He went out to the lot out front to see if the Avanti was still there.

There was a black car sitting out front and a man was putting Johnny's things into the trunk, the bag that Daniel had planned to pack himself for their weekend getaway, he just hadn't had time yet.

The man shut the trunk.

"Hey what are you doing? That's Johnny's," Daniel said.

"Yeah, whole point," said a familiar voice behind him and Daniel spun.

Chozen brushed past him, holding the bonsai that he carefully put into the darkened back seat.

Johnny was in there, Daniel knew it he just couldn't see him. Couldn't find those blue eyes in the darkness.

"What are you doing here?"

"He nearly died," Chozen said.

"I didn't-"

"Didn't keep safe," Chozen said shutting the door and leaning against it, blocking Daniel from Johnny.

"You tried to kill him with a knife," Daniel said.

"I did, not to hurt, motivate. Motivate you to fight. But you not fight enough. Not strong enough. So now I come and get Johnny-san. Take somewhere safer. Somewhere peaceful and quiet. Johnny-san like Okinawa, take to Okinawa. Far from your," Chozen waved his hand in a circle towards Daniel. "danger."

Daniel stepped forward, "Just let me talk to him."

"No need."

"I don't want him to get hurt."

"Too late."

"You hurt him too!"

"Accident. You led him straight to enemy. Straight to Kreese. Didn't fight back, didn't fight *for* him." Chozen pushed off the car and pointed a finger at Daniel. "I warned you. You didn't listen. I said *You take Johnny-san into dojo, but not defeat his enemies. They will come back. Must squash like bugs. His enemies will become yours. Old sensei will come back, bite harder.* I was right. Came back. Bit harder. Hurt Johnny-san."

"I didn't mean to. I was trying to learn how to keep him safe."

"And instead became a cobra. Left your dojo and joined other dojo. Betrayed dojo. Betrayed Miyagi sensei. Betrayed Johnny-san. Worst of all betrayed self," Chozen said shaking his head.

"I just wanted to go somewhere else to practice-"

"Excuse. Silver stroked your ego. Thought maybe false things were real. Stranger saw promise. Wanted Silver to be right. That bad man thought you had heart. That you were champion. But you're a coward and stranger lied. Silver lied. You learned nothing."

Daniel stepped towards him. Like hell he'd let Chozen kidnap Johnny. He held up his fists.

"I learned plenty."

"How to destroy enemies? It's not Miyagi sensei's way. Did not befriend enemy either. Pour oil on fire. Made bigger. Failed. Failed Johnny-san. Nearly died. Yet you think you should keep him?"

"Yes!" Daniel said. "I was tricked. I was upset because I was scared. I owe him an apology and thanks for- for coming when he did and I'll

learn. I'll learn how to stop Kreese next time."

Chozen let out a mirthless laugh.

"Did not even try, and think next time. Think will defeat Kreese but not even think of Silver. Must defeat all to be safe. But you are scared. Too scared to fight. There will *not* be next time."

He turned and opened the back door to the car.

Daniel tried to see in, to see Johnny and couldn't.

"Wait," Daniel said rushing forward, heart-pounding, if Chozen left with Johnny he'd never see him again.

"Don't worry," Chozen said sitting down in the backseat. "I will treat Johnny-san like prince. Live happy life. Just away from you. Safer. Like you thought about. Make inner wish come true."

The door shut and the car drove off.

Daniel ran to the Ford to try and get it started, to give chase, to get Johnny back. But his keys kept slipping out of his hands, he couldn't find them under his seat. He cursed and cursed and tried again and again.

He woke up startled, Johnny gently shaking him awake. The light was on. For a moment he was confused. He didn't know where he was.

It wasn't Mr. Miyagi's. But Johnny was there looking down at him with concern in those blue eyes.

He reached up, pulling him down to him, wrapping his arms around him, feeling his solid weight and breath and heartbeat.

"You're okay," Johnny said softly, arms wrapping around him, under him.

Daniel let out a breath of laughter.

Johnny looked up at him from where he'd rested his head on Daniel's chest.

"My nightmare was about not being able to find *you*," Daniel said softly. "And Chozen."

"I'm not going anywhere," Johnny said then tilted his head

thoughtfully. "Except wherever we're going tomorrow. But that's together. Are we going somewhere where I might get lost?"

Daniel's pounding heart settled and he shook his head.

"Sneaky. I'm not telling you a thing. You gotta wait."

Johnny sighed, turning his head to the side and resting it back on Daniel's chest, listening to his heartbeat.

"What time is it?" Daniel asked.

"Four-thirty," Johnny said softly.

Daniel lifted his hands and ran them through Johnny's hair.

"Want to go back to sleep?" Johnny asked.

"No."

"What do you want to do?"

"Just lay here with you."

"Okay."

Daniel woke up squinting at the sunlight streaming in through Johnny's window.

It smelled like pumpkin.

They'd moved.

Johnny's arms were still around him but he was no longer laying on Daniel, he had moved so he was on his side with Daniel in his arms.

Johnny didn't move much in his sleep and the light was off. So Daniel must've fallen asleep first and Johnny must've turned the light off again and moved.

He tried to roll over, it was difficult, it seemed when Johnny fell asleep with a purpose it became a steel trap.

Daniel huffed, wiggling, the arms around him tightened and he squirmed.

He wanted to see Johnny's face. But it was hard to do when all that muscle was keeping him in one spot.

He never thought the muscle he liked so much would turn against him in such a way.

It was comforting right up until he tried to move, then it was like a finger trap, the more he tried to escape it the more Johnny held on.

"You're awake aren't you?" Daniel huffed. "Let me roll over will you?"

Johnny laughed softly on the back of his neck, pressing his lips there.

"You wiggle so much in your sleep I wasn't sure you were awake."

"Excuses," Daniel said pushing the arm over him up and rolling over frowning.

"Sleep better this time?"

"Yeah, until I woke up trapped."

"Hurt, scared or annoyed?" Johnny asked softly.

"Annoyed and frustrated."

Johnny kissed his forehead.

"I woke up on the other end of the bed when you had your nightmare. I figured part of it was because you weren't on me, you know? So I figured this way you'd feel me in your sleep. I think it helped."

"Probably did," Daniel murmured looking around the room in the daytime.

He wondered if Johnny wished this had been his room. If his mother had lived here and it'd been the two of them, instead of a mansion with Sid. If his mother had gotten a better job, one with better pay and benefits. What kind of life he could've lived?

It would've been better for sure. It would've been nice to have come over more.

It was a little more private than the paper screen doors at Mr. Miyagi's. But it felt like going backward.

Daniel wanted to go forward. Together.

He pushed himself up, a new goal in mind, to try Johnny's ensuite bathroom. He kissed Johnny gently before pulling out of the warmth of his embrace and prepared to snoop. Curious to see what Ms. Lawrence thought Johnny needed.

What products and scents she'd gotten.

Floral.

Everything was floral scented.

Lavenders. Chamomiles.

Sleepy scents. Relaxing scents.

Oatmeal.

There was bubble bath on one of the shelves, razors, and shaving cream. Expensive stuff he wanted to try.

The towels were soft as well, plush.

He almost felt like he was staying at a hotel. A fancy hotel.

He opened one of the drawers. Condoms and lube. Different types, like she hadn't been sure what to get, or thought he might as well try different types. Daniel stared. He tried to remember if his mother had ever bought him condoms. Was that a thing parents did? Maybe?

Johnny had said there were condoms in every single bathroom at Jimmy's house.

Daniel wanted to try them. Compare. But she'd know right? If those boxes were opened.

It wasn't like Daniel didn't have condoms or lube. He kept some in the Ford, in his desk and bedside drawer.

Johnny was usually right that Mr. Miyagi's place probably wasn't the best place...or any of the other places Daniel tried to float ideas across at. Okay, jump his bones was probably more accurate.

He closed the drawer.

Opened it again.

Closed it.

Frowned and with difficulty, turned to shower.

It was a nice bathroom. Everything was nice.

He felt a little bad.

Ms. Lawrence had set it up for Johnny. Like she'd hoped but would never ask Johnny to live with her.

It was all meant to be lived in. But Johnny had picked Daniel and Mr. Miyagi.

She'd set up a lovely home. Something so starkly different from the mansion.

Normal but nice. Cozy.

He remembered his mother said that some parents go through a nesting phase, where they try to make everything perfect and safe for a child.

It was kind of like that. But not for the child version of Johnny.

She'd set up it for him now.

Which Daniel knew his mother wouldn't do for him. She'd set out the childhood stuff that he'd outgrown and didn't play with anymore.

It was like she didn't want to pressure Johnny to stay but wanted to make it comfortable enough that he could if he wanted.

She could've just made a guest room. A nondescript space for any guest who wanted to spend the night. Or had a couple of guest rooms. But instead, she made space for Johnny. She'd painted the walls, filled the bookshelves with books that he liked, photos, and music.

The bed was more comfortable than Daniel's own. The bath mat was plush, the carpet of the bedroom was soft, there were clothes in the closet that she'd bought so he wouldn't ever have to bring anything. He could show up any time and stay for as long as he wanted.

He thought, once upon a time that that was how the apartment in New Jersey would be for him. And then after a while, South Seas would be that way. But the earth was ever-shifting beneath him.

He envied Johnny a little. That his mother was there. That she could create this nice space for him. That he had a mother who embarrassed

him by filling a drawer full of condoms and lube. That painted his room even though he was 18, made a safe space for him to come to, a home if he ever needed it.

Daniel felt a bit like a seed in the wind, like the way dandelions become, that some kid had picked it up and blown on it and he'd been separated from everything in that one breath.

They would just have to come over and spend the night more often.

After the tournament. After the danger was over.

Daniel didn't want to accidentally lead Silver to Ms. Lawrence's doorstep.

He'd never be able to forgive himself.

He wrapped a towel around himself and pushed open the door to the bedroom.

They'd do dinners. Get an apartment and she'd come over too. And they'd spend the night when it was too late to drive home and they'd sleep in that nice soft bed.

Daniel dried his hair while looking over the bag he'd brought with him, half tempted to open that closet and grab one of Johnny's shirts.

If Johnny wasn't there he might.

Daniel turned towards the bed, Johnny had left the comfort of the bed.

The bedding was gone as well. Whisked away.

Well, then Daniel would just take a look.

See what clothes were in Johnny's closet.

He flicked through the clothes on the hangers. It kind of looked like she picked things specifically to show off his eyes. To make them bluer.

Nice dress clothes.

Nice lounge clothes.

There were a couple of band t-shirts, and Daniel flicked through those,

curious. Then moved onto flannels.

He sighed, it'd be weird.

Ms. Lawrence would know.

It'd be awkward.

He changed into the clothes he brought with him.

He'd steal Johnny's clothes some other time.

He hung his towels back up and walked out into the hall to follow that smell of pumpkin.

Ms. Lawrence and Johnny are in the kitchen. She'd made pumpkin muffins that she set out on a plate for him, smiling warmly at him.

It was nice.

A snapshot of what could've been.

Picking Johnny up for a date and hanging out at her place just like the times Johnny had hung out at his.

Maybe he would've been less intimidated by Ms. Lawrence if he'd run into her in this home instead of the mansion.

Instead of meeting the staff first.

It would've felt....normal.

Shortly after breakfast, Jimmy picked Daniel up. They'd talked about it the night before because Daniel wanted to get some things from the boxes in one of Jimmy's guest rooms.

At the mansion, Jimmy led Daniel through the halls towards the room with the stuff from their apartment. He leaned against the door frame and Daniel walked in and was hit with the smell of home. His mother's perfume and he felt his eyes water.

"Looking for something specific?" Jimmy asked.

Daniel blinked rapidly and brushed off tears. "Yeah, uh Ma's recipes, there's a recipe box and some cookbooks."

"Right," Jimmy said walking into the room and wrapping an arm around Daniel's shoulder. "Well it's been several months since we packed it all up, so I'm not sure where it is, but I'll help you look."

Daniel wanted to tell Jimmy he didn't have to waste his time helping Daniel go through his old stuff to find a recipe box. But just looking at all of it was overwhelming and there was sincerity in Jimmy's voice.

"Thank you," Daniel said.

There were a lot of boxes, but somehow both more and less than he expected. Furniture covered with sheets, their sofa, and their TV, their lamps, his mom's bed taken apart and set carefully aside. Boxes of their kitchen things, living room stuff, the old photo albums, the books that his mother read and kept and his father's favorite books they hadn't been able to let go of, clothing, bedding, towels and just everything, carefully packed away.

It was weird to be going through boxes and finding things that he knew where they were supposed to go in a place that no longer existed.

Two places now.

He asked Jimmy about his classes, about the still open case with Cobra Kai and Ms. Lawrence.

Asked about safer subjects to focus on then the overwhelming feeling of how he felt like the boxes around him and all the stuff in them.

Displaced, untethered, and unsure where he'd be going.

Jimmy talked about Jennifer, about how over the weekend he was planning to ask her out. There was an event she was interested in and he'd managed to snag tickets. He sounded excited.

The case though was all a flurry of movement now that Silver had been found and Daniel noticed that Jimmy spoke slowly, cautiously about it with Daniel. Carefully tip towing like he was worried just the mention of Terry Silver would hurt Daniel.

Daniel was pretty sure he could handle hearing his name.

Seeing him again on the other hand...that Daniel wasn't ready for. But there was time before the tournament and he hoped that'd be okay. Time for him to forget all about Silver and focus on training and

getting him out of his life.

He felt relieved, relieved he hadn't sunk deeper into the trap.

He'd gotten scratched up, but without a support system, without people at his side caring and pointing things out, so many people at least, he might've drowned in it.

It would've been exponentially worse.

It sounded like Jimmy had a plan, or the team he worked with had a plan. Enough evidence to do *something*.

They just needed to find people first. People who wouldn't be swayed by Silver's money to look the other way or sabotage their plans.

Jimmy didn't go into detail, but he sounded confident. Felt like he had a hang of taking out the trash he said with a rueful smile like he was thinking of Sid.

It took two hours to find his mother's cookbook and recipe box and when they found it they sat on the only available space in the room.

"What's the plan?" Jimmy asked.

"It's for this weekend."

"Romantic getaway?"

"Yeah."

"You know we have these large picnic baskets that are insulated, want to borrow one? We use them for festivals," Jimmy asked. "They've got cases so they just look like big bags, you can't tell they're picnic baskets. Johnny said you weren't telling him the plan. So it might help."

"That would be perfect actually," Daniel said flicking through her recipes. Looking at his mother's careful handwriting. He was finding everything he wanted easily, setting them aside, each one he wanted to make.

Jimmy glanced over the cards Daniel set aside. "That's a lot."

Daniel laughed softly. "Yes. But it's like a set and we'll be gone the whole weekend, so I figure this is the best idea."

"Johnny is going to become so spoiled," Jimmy said with a soft smile, almost like it was a good thing. Like he was glad someone was trying to spoil Johnny.

"He cooks too," Daniel said amused.

"What's he make?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Okinawan food," Daniel said with a laugh. "He apparently found all the places where they sell the special ingredients and he wrote down all of Yukie's recipes. All the things she taught him. You should see Mr. Miyagi's face when Johnny cooks it. His face lights up. It's very sweet."

"Is it weird?" Jimmy asked.

"What?"

"They're both so quiet. Like I'm pretty sure if you didn't talk wouldn't they spend the whole day just completely silent?"

"They talk. I came home late once, you know, from when I was studying under Silver and I tried sneaking in and I was being all quiet and the two of them were sitting out on the wooden walkway drinking tea. They were talking about Mr. Miyagi's life. Johnny was asking him about what it'd been like crossing the ocean by himself to another country away from his family and friends and then to find that new home at war with a country that claimed his home as part of it. Mr. Miyagi talks but it takes a while for him to open up. And I'm never sure when he's comfortable talking about things. But he talked to Johnny about it. He really only talked about Okinawa when we went. Before then I didn't even know his father had been alive still. And I think I only learned about his wife and the war because I came by on the anniversary. I just stood there and listened. I didn't want to interrupt."

"I don't think they would've minded."

Daniel shook his head. "If I'd walked in and sat with them I would've started asking Mr. Miyagi a billion questions. Rapid-fire. Johnny just listens and lets Mr. Miyagi speak."

"You do too. You know you're important to him. To both of them."

Daniel knew because they always welcomed him to join them, always made space for him, and listened. But Daniel liked those quiet

moments where he got to see something else, a different part of their day, what they did without him and it was so peaceful that it had been like a salve after practicing at the Cobra Kai dojo.

Jimmy stood up and dusted himself off scooping up the cookbook and the cards.

"Come on, let's get you that picnic basket. What's are you planning to drink?"

"I don't know, water?" Daniel shrugged following him down the hall. "I've been a bit focused on dinner."

Jimmy laughed. "You're throwing a romantic dinner, that you're cooking and you're going to just drink water? Okay, so Italian right? How about wine?"

"I don't know if you've seen my face, but I can't even pretend to get alcohol unless it's someplace you know they don't card and won't look at my face."

"Daniel Daniel Daniel, have you forgotten where you are?" Jimmy asked shaking his head. He opened a door, was gone for a few minutes, and came back with a boxy bag with a strap that he handed Daniel "Picnic basket is in there."

He then motioned for Daniel to follow down the halls past the kitchen where Jimmy opened a door and headed downstairs into a basement.

"This isn't like *The Cask of Amontillado* is it?" Daniel asked standing at the top of the stairs with a frown.

"You know I thought you were going to sleep through English class, didn't realize you remembered some of the short stories. You always looked so bored."

"Hey, the only one any good at reading aloud was Johnny. Listening to everyone robotically read was incredibly boring. Don't tell me you weren't also bored with it."

Jimmy shrugged. "I read ahead and ignored everyone reading. Here take your pick," he said standing in the center of a wine cellar and holding his arms out. "We don't keep anything my parents would miss in here."

"That seems impossible."

"They have a bar with a wine fridge," Jimmy said with a shrug. "That's where all the stuff they keep for special occasions. This stuff is fair game. We've even got a couple of barrels of aging bourbon, scotch, and rum. But there's no way you could get that to your date easily."

Daniel carefully set the bag on the steps and walked around, it was almost like a library, with tall shelves filled with bottles of wine and other alcohols.

"This is a lot of booze."

"We host a lot of parties," Jimmy said.

"They're good parties?"

"Yeah? You weren't scared that first time? With Ali?"

Daniel looked through the wine types he recognized. "In the moment it was overwhelming, but now I look back at that party fondly. Ma was happy I was getting out and spending time with people and that was nice, but what makes me happy now is that I kissed Johnny then. I'm glad I did."

Daniel knew Johnny probably didn't count it as a kiss, not their first kiss. And they'd had better ones since, a lot of better ones. But he'd liked having their own little world in Jimmy's house where nothing else had mattered except that he put his mouth on Johnny's as fast as possible. That need had only gotten worse over time, but it'd been a wake-up call for him, a spark of those feelings, the first true inkling.

Daniel picked a red wine and held it out to Jimmy. "What do you think?"

Jimmy studied the label. "What's the base tomato or cream?"

"Tomato."

"Then this is a good choice," Jimmy said with a smile.

He helped Daniel pack up the wine carefully in the picnic basket and walked with him back to his car. "Want me to drop you off at Mr. Miyagi's or back at Ms. Lawrence's?"

"Mr. Miyagi's, if that's okay. I'd like to get some of this cooking done before tomorrow."

"Of course, not a problem," Jimmy said with a smile.

On the drive back to Reseda he talked to Jimmy about the east coast versus west coast. About similarities and differences.

"Do you get jellyfish that wash up on the shore here?" Daniel asked.

"We do. Actually, both Tommy and Johnny have been stung by Jellyfish."

"Seriously? When? Where?"

"Tommy's beach house," Jimmy said. "I wasn't with them the first time when Tommy got stung. But the second time we were all hanging out and Tommy's uncle was around because we were younger then. Johnny went out surfing and came back and walked very stiffly up to Tommy's uncle and said "sir, I've been stung by a jellyfish." I swear we all freaked out more than he did. Tommy's uncle's a doctor and took care of it, but he was so damn calm that it was practically surreal. I remember asking him if it hurt and he said "Yes." and I thought damn Johnny is tough as nails. But the longer I got to know him, I realized he's just very good at hiding."

"Yeah. I-I worry that Kreese hurt him worse than he's letting on."

Jimmy glanced at him.

"Probably. But Johnny's kind of like an oyster. Hard as hell to get to open up. But if you get it to open up on its own it's easier. And you've managed that. He didn't shut down after Kreese this time. Instead, he's put whatever plan he has in motion. I think it's because of you. And because of uh...Silver. He's got a goal. He would've just spent his whole life avoiding Kreese until Kreese decided to find him again if that ever happened. Would've just thought it was his fault everything happened. But because of you, because of everything with Silver...well if he's anything like his mother he's going to salt the earth so he doesn't come back."

"What if he gets hurt because of-"

"Nope, stop that," Jimmy said shaking his head. "Those two are not your fault *or* your responsibility. You can't let yourself take the blame for other people's actions or take the fall for them. Only your own. And hell we kind of all know what it's like to be betrayed by a teacher. You got the crash course of Cobra Kai in like a month and a half. We did that shit for five years thinking it was normal. Not the same of course. I'm sure Silver made it a different type of hell. But that destroy your enemy shit? We're lucky that didn't send us down a path

to just constant jail time you know? We're lucky he didn't make us all jumpy at our own shadows. But we're healing. And you will too. It just takes time and you gotta give yourself that time. Just like you gotta give Johnny time."

Daniel sighed, folding his arms across his chest and sinking down in his seat. "I don't normally get nightmares, but all of this gave me one."

"It can get pretty bad."

"Chozen came and took Johnny away."

Jimmy laughed. "I'm sorry about laughing, but seriously that's your nightmare? Not Kreese?"

Daniel pushed himself up. "I'll kick Kreese's ass if he tries anything again. But Chozen had said something before I left and it's been rolling around in my head every since Kreese popped up again and I froze."

"What'd he say?"

"He told me I had to defeat Johnny's enemies or they'd come back. Not just defeat but *squash them*. Or else, essentially after they finished licking their wounds they'd come back and be worse and look what happened, they did."

"Hmm," Jimmy said thoughtfully. "I really don't think Chozen has some special way to see into the future. Because Kreese's attack was a window of opportunity right? Wrong place at the wrong time? They were focused on *you*. Dutch said that. You and Mr. Miyagi. They didn't care about the rest of us. They only went after Johnny because he was your boyfriend, not because he was Johnny. They were after you. So your nightmare Chozen is wrong. Besides, there's no way anymore that Johnny would let himself be taken away. It may not look like it but he's putting down roots. He never used to, but he is for sure now. He's getting comfortable. Look at him the next time he's curled up in Mr. Miyagi's garden with a book. See how relaxed he is around you, look a little closer. He's relaxed and peaceful. He used to be ready to go at any second. Mapping out his escape route, you could see it in his eyes. He still does it sometimes, but more out of a habit I think than actually planning it anymore. Hell just look at your own room. He wasn't taking up any space in that room when you guys first moved in with Mr. Miyagi like he wasn't sure if he was welcome to stick around. But look around again. There's no way Chozen could take him away

from you. Even if he got knocked out again he'd run straight back first chance he could."

Daniel thought about it quietly the rest of the way to Mr. Miyagi's and he did feel better.

Daniel carried the basket and his mothers cookbook and recipe box into the kitchen and set them down. Then he headed to their room and pushed the door open.

He looked around, at Johnny's bedside table, his bonsai, the lamp he'd bought and the pile of books, the whale shark on the bed, his clothes in the closet hung up next to Daniel's, clothes in the drawers, his music mixed in with Daniel's, photos they both liked set up on the shelves together. Johnny with his mother at graduation, all of them at graduation together, Daniel and his parents when he was little, with Mr. Miyagi, all of them in Okinawa. Photos with the guys in New York and from their other adventures. The polaroids from the snow sculptures. A notebook and folder that were Johnny's on Daniel's desk. Their sanshin's sitting together, leaning against one another in the corner. Little things from their trip to Okinawa and things from New York City mixed together. He hadn't noticed it happening, what originally had been a room completely overwhelmed by all of Daniel's things lifted from the South Seas Apartment Complex and settled into Mr. Miyagi's guest house was no longer the same as it had been with Johnny's things still living in his bags in the corner, or in the trunk of the Avanti, it was now a blend of the two of them.

He smiled warmly. Jimmy was right. Johnny's room at the mansion had barely been him. Sparse. But he had made himself at home and Daniel had been so worried about Silver he hadn't even noticed. He carefully shut the door and turned back to the kitchen, rolling up his sleeves. He had a lot of work to do.

Scampagnata

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daniel said goodbye to Mr. Miyagi was trying to pull Johnny out the door.

They were taking the Ford and Daniel had filled the trunk and hadn't let Johnny look inside.

Johnny told Mr. Miyagi to have a good weekend, thanked him again for babysitting the bonsai, and had reminded him that some of the guys and Jessica were still around if he needed anything. They were taking Bobby's little siblings trick or treating because that was when all the kids got to go, on the weekend after Halloween.

Jessica said she was excited to dress up and take them trick or treating, but Johnny had warned her that they usually mapped out all the dentist and doctor houses. They loved Tommy's house because his uncle gave out Halloween mystery booklets that you started at the beginning and worked through to solve a themed mystery. Like a workbook and mystery novel in one. And he gave out raisins.

Pretty much everywhere on their list gave out non-candy. Apples and mini bags of baby carrots. The Brown house on the other hand gave out popcorn balls and king-sized candy bars. Then she was supposed to go to some party with them on campus, but they'd still only be a half-hour away if Mr. Miyagi needed anything. He'd bookmarked all their numbers in the shared phone book.

"Johnny-san, Miyagi okay. Go. Have fun."

"Right, sorry," Johnny said as Daniel huffed, grabbing his hand impatiently and pulling him the rest of the way out of the house.

He forgot that Mr. Miyagi had lived alone for a long time and was used to it. He hoped that Mr. Miyagi would call Yukie and have a relaxing weekend without them, but worried he'd get lonely. Maybe they should get Mr. Miyagi a cat or dog. Adopt one of the animals from the sanctuary.

He sat down in the passenger seat of the Ford while Daniel started the car then handed over the hachimaki Mr. Miyagi had gotten Johnny for

his birthday.

"Are we sparring?"

"I don't want you to start guessing, so cover your eyes."

"I could just close them."

"True, but I'd rather you not see. Not even a peek."

Johnny took the hachimaki and tied it around his forehead. He turned to Daniel.

Daniel flicked it down over his eyes and kissed him.

"How long is this going to last?" Johnny asked, thinking maybe he should've put his seat belt on first as he felt around for it, belting himself in, carefully.

"**Awhile**, so get comfortable," Daniel said.

Daniel played music on the radio while he drove and it was odd. Strange not seeing where they were going or where Daniel was but hearing him singing along to the songs on the radio, occasionally talking about music, the bands he liked, the one's he hadn't thought he'd like but ended up liking from the collection Johnny had brought with him from the mansion. After about a half-hour, after Johnny was sure they were close to being out of the city or were already out of it. He was trying to think of where they were going, what direction they might've headed off in, when Daniel's hand found his thigh, and Johnny jumped.

"Sorry," Daniel said but there was laughter in his tone like he was amused. "I guess you can't *sense* me in a car."

He was talking about the balance wheel.

Johnny huffed.

"On the balance wheel, I can feel you moving. In the Ford, all I feel is the Ford. I was listening to you sing and didn't notice."

The last big secret Daniel had kept had been Terry Silver.

This though was supposed to be a challenge. A *do anything the other wanted* because Daniel had won their race. But Johnny was pretty sure it was just a date.

The win didn't *have* to be a date. It could've been *anything*. Johnny would've gone along with a date anyway. He'd gone to do things he hadn't thought he would've enjoyed with Daniel and had learned it was usually fun. It felt a bit like a waste. Had expected something else. At the very least that Daniel would've asked to get out of his chores for like a month. Not a secret weekend date.

He couldn't think of what he'd have done if he'd won though. Maybe he'd have ended up in the same boat of deciding on a date. Something Daniel would like but might not have been interested in on his own. What though he didn't know. Daniel was down for anything.

He thought he might fall asleep if he had to keep wearing the hachimaki like a blindfold for much longer.

"You can see now if you want," Daniel said giving Johnny's leg a squeeze.

Johnny pushed the hachimaki back up to his forehead.

They were driving through a woods.

A quick glance at the clock showed they'd left nearly three hours ago and the trees were huge.

"Stop that," Daniel said.

"Stop what?"

"You're trying to figure out where we are."

"Well, then I'm going to need a distraction aren't I?" Johnny said turning towards Daniel.

That kind of worked. Just focusing on Daniel, wearing his flannel, driving at ease in the Ford almost like he belonged further north as they drove through the forest. He hadn't let Johnny pick out his own clothes, hadn't let Johnny pack. Just asked for the keys to the Avanti and had to promise he wasn't going to drive it, just wanted to get something out of it. Wouldn't let Johnny look in the trunk of the Ford.

Johnny had ideas now that they were in the forest. It was hard not to. He was pretty sure they were going camping.

Which sounded nice.

Right. Don't start solving the mystery yet.

Let Daniel have his fun.

Daniel parked his Ford and headed to the trunk where he gave a backpack to Johnny.

"I can carry more," Johnny said after slipping the bag onto his back.

"You can carry more on the way back," Daniel said holding three different bags, closing the trunk.

Johnny didn't even have a clue which one his tent was probably in.

Maybe they weren't going camping.

Stop. Let it be a surprise.

Even if every hint pointed to camping or a lodge. But he doubted they were staying at a lodge, they were too expensive.

He couldn't stop.

He couldn't even hold Daniel's hand, because both of his hands were too full.

He shoved his own hands in his red jacket pockets following Daniel down the trail, taking in the gigantic trees.

Sequoia.

Damnit.

He was trying so damn hard. But he knew where he was and he knew they were camping and why had it been such a big deal?

Johnny would've gone camping with him any time, it didn't have to be a bet in order to get him there.

It also seemed unfair if it was a win for Daniel to carry everything.

Shouldn't Johnny have been carrying everything?

"You sure?" Johnny asked after a while as they continued down the path.

"I'm sure," Daniel said.

Daniel had brought his hachimaki, maybe they were going to spar. In

the woods over 3 hours away from home.

Why? They'd already agreed they'd spar with Dutch as chaperone. Or was it just an easy blindfold?

Daniel was too quiet, though he was muttering to himself.

He'd ask.

"Are we sparring?" Johnny asked.

"Nope, unless we want to," Daniel said heading off on a small path that wasn't as clear as the others.

Johnny followed him to a clearing.

Daniel set his things down carefully in the grass and stretched.

"We're allowed a small fire," Daniel said. "If you want to look for wood. They made a big deal about bringing in your own wood. Something about invasive bugs."

Johnny nodded setting his bag down in the pile and heading off back into the woods in search of pieces of wood to build a fire with. He found and kept looking.

Most of the parks had firewood you could buy, but he assumed Daniel had a reason for sending him off before it got dark to get firewood.

They'd left Mr. Miyagi after lunch and Johnny felt bad, but the sun set earlier in November and it was already starting to get dark.

Were they really going to spend the whole weekend in the woods?

Daniel had complained about sleeping on the floor in Okinawa, could he handle a tent on the ground?

Did he even know how to put up a tent?

Was he aware that California had bears?

That any food needed to be hung up?

Johnny was going to have to throw Daniel over his shoulder and run away from a bear, wasn't he?

A bear at least would be a welcome change.

It would *just* want their food.

No karate feuds.

No honor.

No Ali.

Nothing.

Just a bear wanting food.

So simple.

With their luck, Silver and Kreese would be taking Barnes and his friends out karate camping to learn how to live off the land and self-reliance. But Kreese would never venture three hours out of LA for a field trip.

Once he found enough wood and things to use as tinder he walked back the way he'd come.

Daniel had set up Johnny's tent and had set out a blanket with a picnic basket and was in the midst of pouring wine.

The sun was setting and it was as Tommy liked to call it, golden hour, and it was what Daniel looked like, golden. So damn beautiful that Johnny froze on the edge of the clearing like he understood the old stories of men who'd walk into the woods and see a nymph and fall in love immediately. To go mad with it and chase them through the woods until they turned into a tree or a flower. He hadn't ever gotten it before. But Daniel looked so at peace, humming to himself that if he had gotten up and bolted Johnny would've chased after him, refusing to lose sight of the brunette.

His dad probably took him camping.

He probably went with that large family of his and knew what to do.

Johnny probably didn't have to worry about Daniel and bears trying to steal their food.

He might try and fight them for it though, he might still have to grab Daniel and run away from a bear. But only because Daniel would try and fight it, depending on what it was after, what kind of food he'd brought. Pizza for sure. Daniel really was particular about his pizza. He also loved his mac and cheese.

Daniel stood up, dusting himself off and clapping his hands.

"Alright, where'd he go? Did he get lost? Maybe he saw a pretty flower and is still out there staring at it."

Accurate. Just not a flower. *Better*.

One foot in front of the other. Don't get caught being a creep. It's why nymphs turned into trees. Because the guys were creeps. The wood is for a fire for when it gets dark. Don't let nightfall with you stuck at the edge of the clearing staring at Daniel. Even if when he stretches his flannel rides up and exposes skin, and he's rolling up his sleeves and ruffling his hair, judging his handwork like a piece of art not knowing he himself is the art.

He stepped into the clearing, swallowing hard feeling like that first lunch where he sat down next to Daniel. Like all the words he wanted to say had flown off. He picked something safer.

"Where do you want these?" Johnny asked.

"There," Daniel said pointing to a spot cleared of any grass, that someone else before them had used for a fire pit.

Johnny walked over setting up the wood the way they did for the beach bonfires.

He hadn't grabbed enough for tinder.

Daniel knelt down next to the wood. He pulled a bag in close and pulled out a stack of paper. He started ripping it up and put it under the wood, pulling out a packet of matches, dragging one across the side, and tossing it on the paper, gently coaxing the small fire until it was bigger. Focused and calm.

He looked up at Johnny and grinned.

"What'd you burn?" Johnny asked.

"All the copies of the tournament form Barnes kept giving me. Silver gave them to me too. I ended up with a bag full, I just kept shoving them in the back of the Ford. Figured this would be...cathartic."

"Is it?" Johnny asked.

Daniel stood up and nodded. "Yeah."

He walked back to the blanket on the ground and took off his shoes settling down on it, motioning to the other side.

Johnny wondered if he'd ended up back in Okinawa for a second, back in the nightmare of quiet tea ceremonies where everyone just stared at him.

He could not handle a weekend of Daniel being silent. He didn't think Daniel could handle an entire weekend of being quiet. Both of them would be miserable.

Johnny copied Daniel, taking off his shoes and setting them aside, sitting down on the other side of the blanket.

Daniel was pulling things out of his basket. A small dish with a lid on it that he set carefully in the middle of them and he got out plates and a serving utensil. He removed the lid.

"That does not look like picnic food," Johnny said. It looked messy, some Italian thing, cheesy and saucy.

"*Melanzane alla parmigiana,"* Daniel said. "We'll eat it on the bread, like a sandwich."

"What is it?" Johnny asked holding his plate as Daniel sliced it and put it on the bread.

"Eggplant parmesan," Daniel said.

He set his own plate aside after finishing making their sandwiches and opened another container.

"I also made croquettes, pasta salad, and there are fruit and cherry tomatoes. I also brought wine."

"How did you get your hands on wine?" Johnny asked.

Daniel had made too much food. Johnny wasn't sure they'd be able to eat it all over the weekend.

"Jimmy," Daniel said, handing Johnny a glass.

"When did you cook all of this?" Johnny asked

"Yesterday while you helped your mom clean up. Ma left her recipe box, it was at Jimmy's so I got it with the wine and I thought we could do *scampagnata* even if it's the wrong season. But it's California where

I'm pretty sure seasons are made up. Like it's a snow globe only always sunny skies and smog."

"No smog here," Johnny said.

"True," Daniel said looking around at the tall trees with a warm smile. He held up his wine glass turning to Johnny. "*Cin Cin*"

"Cin Cin?" Johnny asked gently tapping his glass to Daniel's.

Only Daniel would bring actual glassware camping. Actual wine glasses. Real plates. Real silverware.

Johnny always used things that weren't as breakable and were more clunky, thicker, not elegant.

"It's kind of like the sound the glass makes," Daniel said, "It's followed by *alla nostra salute.*"

"Alla nostra salute?"

"Yup, to your health," Daniel said taking a sip of the wine and set it aside to pick up his sandwich and eat.

Everything was delicious. The parmesan and eggplant sandwich, the croquettes, the pasta salad. It was like they were prepping for a marathon. He realized after popping a cherry tomato in his mouth.

Were they prepping for a marathon?

A race through the woods?

Or was this just an Italian thing?

Daniel was talking about how weird it was to walk into one of Jimmy's guest rooms and see all the stuff from their apartment. All of his mom's stuff.

Johnny took Daniel's hand and held it gently in his own.

When it got dark they packed up the meal, putting everything carefully in a metal box at the edge of the campsite with a lock Daniel had to keep it safe from curious animals. Daniel had come prepared which was a relief.

It was cooler in the woods and they moved to sit a little closer to the fire, wrapped up in another blanket Daniel had brought.

"Is this Mr. Miyagi's beach towel blanket?" Johnny asked amused.

"He gave it to me, said it's useful to have a beach blanket."

"Does he not believe in beach *towels*?"

"You have to admit those are scratchy, and this has multiple purposes."

"I'd think a towel would be cheaper."

"I think there's a secret meaning to everything he does. Maybe there's a secret meaning to this," Daniel said in a tone that made Johnny laugh, flopping onto his back.

Daniel laid down next to him.

"What do you want to do?"

Johnny turned to him. "What do you mean?"

"Do you want to stay in LA?"

"Yeah. You?"

"I think so."

"What about Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees? Do you want to work there forever?" Johnny asked.

Daniel sighed. "I kind of want to get it so it can run on its own and then I think I might go to college or something for a business degree or maybe not, Maybe a trade school? I think I want to work with cars."

"Yeah?" Johnny asked pushing himself up and looking at Daniel.

"Yeah. I've always liked cars and I like helping Mr. Miyagi work on his cars. I mean I like the bonsai too. But-"

"It's Mr. Miyagi's dream, not yours."

"I don't know if I've got a dream really, but I kind of want to try it. I might hate it, but I like math and I know that's a component."

"You should do it. Or give it a try."

"There's a lot I want to do after the tournament and that's one of the things."

"Like what else?"

"I-" Daniel looked nervous, taking Johnny's hand and holding it within his. "I know you like living at Mr. Miyagi's and you find it peaceful, but I was thinking after the tournament- I want to move out of Mr. Miyagi's. I want to try and find an apartment. I want to move together. I want us to have our own space. I want to be able to wake up next to you in a big bed and I don't know set something up for the guys for when they visit, but I want our *own* space. So we're alone at least *most* of the nights of the week."

Johnny laughed softly.

"What?" Daniel asked sitting up and looking down at him.

"I've been collecting apartment ads."

"You have?"

"Yeah. Anything else you want to get off your chest?"

Daniel chewed on his bottom lip looking at Johnny.

"Yes."

Daniel sat up all the way with a serious look on his face.

Johnny moved, sitting across from him, watching as Daniel shut his eyes, taking a deep breath and then taking his hands again, rubbing his thumbs over Johnny's knuckles.

"When you walked into Mr. Miyagi's workshop I thought you were going to start a fight. I thought things were going to be bad. Like you were pissed I kicked you in the face, that you lost, that Kreese...I thought you were there to be pissed at me. But then you apologized and I was so upset over *everything* that I didn't accept it. I was too stunned. I truly never thought I'd see you in Seven Seas, and it'd kind of been a fear that had sparked. I always feared you'd cross that line, but you never did. You never followed me home in the dark, never past that gate. I mean you knew where I lived, but you'd never threatened me in my home or at Mr. Miyagi's workshop. And I'd been scared that that line you wouldn't cross was gone. But I'm so glad you came to the workshop, that you apologized. You didn't just apologize

in your words but in your actions. I thought you were some spoiled rich kid from the Hills and you aren't. I mean your mom is trying really hard to spoil you *now*." Daniel laughed softly. "But you aren't who I thought you were and I'm so glad. Because the real Johnny Lawrence isn't the one I built up in my head, he has my back and it brings me comfort. I like watching you read whatever book you've found. I like how you interacted with my mom and with my grandparents and how you are with kids, and all the stuff you do that you do when you think no one is looking. No, not like. I love it. *All of it.* I love teasing you and watching you turn red. I love hanging out with you and the guys. I love watching you and Mr. Miyagi sitting in the garden drinking tea. I love how you spend time with your bonsai, making sure it's getting the best sunlight, moving it around Mr. Miyagi's house, around our room so it's catching sunlight. I love doing kata together, practicing on the balance wheel, I love dancing with you. I love how you enjoy my cooking. I love the way you pick out flowers. I love every time you frustrate me, hey don't give me that look, you have to admit it's kind of fun now. I know you're teasing when you do it, you always meet me where I am. I love that you're full of surprises and that you let me in, and I'm so glad you did because I love *you,*" Daniel said lifting his hands from Johnny's to his cheeks brushing tears off of Johnny's cheeks.

There was so much he wanted to say and he didn't know where to start. He'd thought about buying flowers for months.

Camilla in pink, white, and red, red chrysanthemums, daffodils, daisies, heliotrope, holly, honeysuckle, white jasmine, yellow lilies, morning glory, red roses, small sunflowers, red and yellow tulips, and yarrow.

There were too many. Too many that meant how he felt. He'd bury Daniel in flowers on accident. But now he couldn't say it all, too overwhelmed that Daniel had said it.

"I love you too," Johnny said.

He was lucky he'd managed those four words. That he wasn't a blubbering mess. That would've been awful if he'd just been unable to say anything and just kept crying. He hadn't even realized he'd started crying until Daniel's hands were on his face.

Daniel smiled, so fondly that Johnny's heart ached, leaning forward kissing him.

He didn't know what to do with the fact that Daniel loved him. He'd been so overwhelmed in his own love that he hadn't even thought of it being returned. He'd assumed he'd say it first, but had been trying to not say it too fast. Swallowing it back down every morning and every night, at breakfast and in the shop, on their dates, when Daniel made dinner. He had swallowed those three words back down so many times that it'd felt foreign on his tongue but also like breaking through a dam. The rest of it. All the things Daniel did that he loved, all the moments that combined, all their adventures and awful moments together, it'd take time to organize those and tell Daniel he loved him in all those moments too, but he'd figure his way there.

It was a long kiss. The kind where Johnny lost track of time and didn't care, but there was a question rolling around in his head, that was threatening to put an end to the kiss, even though he was too breathless to really ask. But he'd try.

"You won the bike race."

"That I did," Daniel said with a grin, leaning back into kiss Johnny.

"You said *Whatever the other wants,* what do you want?"

Daniel sat back.

"I changed my mind."

"You changed your mind?" Johnny asked amused.

Daniel looked out at the fire with a frown.

"Well in the moment I wanted sex, but I won't rope you into sex out of a bet. That's not how I wanted- I'm not going to challenge you to sex. I mean I still want to, always kind of want to, but it should be nice and romantic and not because you lost a bike race, like you should have a say in what you're comfortable with. I don't want it to be out of like coercion. So it's just a weekend of being stuck with me," Daniel said shrugging.

"I wouldn't have said no," Johnny said. "I say no sometimes because we're not in okay places to do anything. I already told you we're on the same page but places like Mr. Miyagi's truck just feels wrong, right?"

Daniel turned back to him eyes wide.

Johnny kept going. "I mean, this is romantic. You made a picnic, a ton of delicious food. We're camping, which I like, in a nice woods, we've got a fire, and the stars and we're alone. Really all I ever want is to be with you. I think we could make chores romantic if we wanted."

Daniel leaned in close. "Are you sure?"

"Well I don't trust that I know what I'm doing, depending on what you want to do. I got the cliff notes version, and I did not come prepared for anything because someone pushed me out the door and told me not to pack or bring anything except myself."

"I didn't say it that way."

Johnny felt his ears burn. He *hadn't* said it that way. If Daniel kept looking at him the way he was Johnny's tongue would tie up in knots and nothing else would come out of his mouth. He wouldn't say what he felt like he should.

"The point is," Johnny said looking up at the star-filled sky trying not to lose his nerve, feeling Daniel's eyes burning into him. "What *exactly* did you want to do? Or I guess, what can we do without two of the three components the guys told me about in our 'talk'. The stuff we've been doing?"

Daniel sat back a little with a smile on his face. "Okay, now I have to know, what *did* they tell you?"

Johnny glanced at him. "They repeated the importance of lube, condoms, and going slow."

Daniel laughed. "Well they're not wrong, it's just missing some other things, is that *all* they told you."

"Almost, they did mention a little of how it worked, just not details," Johnny said with a frown turning his attention back to the fire. "It devolved into them telling me how no one believed their reason for asking which was 'I have a friend who likes a guy' so they started to complain about that and I pushed them in the lake."

Daniel shifted back, standing up and dusting himself off going to grab one of his bags, his backpack out of the tent, and setting it carefully next to the blanket.

"You've never gone through my desk or bedside drawer have you? Or looked in the glove compartment of the Ford?"

"No."

Daniel sat down next to him unzipping his bag. "I am maybe a little over-prepared...always... But, if you've changed your mind, that's also okay."

"Always prepared?" Johnny asked picking up the box of condoms Daniel set out on the blanket and next to lube. "Were you a boy scout?"

"I don't think *this* is part of being a boy scout," Daniel said with a laugh.

Johnny set the box down and kissed him, his hands on Daniel's shirt, drawing it up, curious what he'd look like in the firelight, under that waning moon.

Daniel took it the rest of the way off, setting it aside, stripping and setting everything in the grass. Johnny worked on his shirt, unbuttoning it, not nearly fast enough as Daniel went straight for his belt.

"You said you wanted to do everything. That you have a list?" Johnny asked.

"I do," Daniel said giving him a heated look. Looking up from where his hands were working. "But only if you want to."

"What are you thinking of... for... now?"

He always made talking so difficult.

"I would like to have sex with you, show you things that your cliff notes skipped. The good parts," Daniel said kissing his neck.

That was very clear, especially with where his fingers had moved to.

"Okay."

"Yeah?"

"If it hurts you let me know okay?"

"Okay."

"Or if you want to stop."

Johnny nodded. "How should I-?"

"Get comfortable," Daniel said gently.

Johnny laid down, which was kind of weird. He was naked in the woods. That was...new. Exposed. Daniel was opening his box. His hand came warmly to Johnny's knee and he felt nervous, listening to the fire crackle, yup too much. But maybe he wasn't alone on that.

He pushed himself up watching Daniel, focused.

"Are you nervous?" Johnny asked.

Daniel blinked then turned back to Johnny, fingers slick with lube like he was playing with it, though Johnny was pretty sure he wasn't.

"Kind of," he said leaning over Johnny's knees to kiss him. "I don't want to hurt you."

Daniel's non-slicked hand gently pressed on the side of Johnny's knee and he moved so Daniel could find space between his legs. He kissed Daniel again, wrapping his arms around the back of his neck.

New wasn't bad, but it took some adjusting, breathing slow, mindful.

Daniel moved slow, glacier, he almost told Daniel he didn't have to move so slow, but he was being so mindful with his fingers. Like there was an additional purpose Johnny didn't know. There probably was he thought.

Daniel was kind of like a good book. No matter how many times you re-read the pages there was always something new to learn, something you didn't notice at first glance. He had misread him at first, and that'd been on him. All the things he once disliked he had understood. He had read the first line wrong, misunderstood it. But after taking the time to go back, to get to know him he loved everything now. Adored him. His chatty nature, the way he didn't back down from a fight, the way he could so easily rile him up with a little bit of teasing and how Daniel would meet him there, game for anything.

They hadn't known each other when they met, just assumed based on one interaction that that was all the other was. Assumptions that created a one-dimensional shadow to hate, to project upon. And it wasn't accurate. It wasn't true. There was so much more to the both of them. A whole history of life and personality and actions that if they'd just calmed down and looked closer-

Daniel touched something and Johnny pulled away from the kiss to arch with a heady moan, hands flying to grip Daniel's arms.

Was that what he'd been going for?

What the hell?

Bobby and Dutch were fired for not giving Johnny the right information.

Daniel followed Johnny back down, to where he was squirming on the blanket, suddenly very relieved they were in the middle of a woods away from anyone and anything. He gasped out a curse.

Daniel looked so damn pleased with himself. Insufferable.

There were stupid myths about going blind from touching yourself too much, but maybe the location had been wrong. Maybe everyone just assumed it was a different spot, not where Daniel's fingers were.

Johnny wanted Daniel closer, but he didn't know exactly how, just that there was too little of him, especially because he was sitting between his legs looking smug, watching Johnny come apart like he was methodically taking Johnny apart, purposefully enjoying the way he writhed.

He was too far away.

"Ready?"

Nothing was connecting, scattered across his mind like the stars in the sky, millions of lightyears apart.

Anything.

Everything.

Whatever.

Together.

He grabbed Daniel's arm and tugged. Daniel leaned down, pressing against him, kissing his chest, his neck, any skin that came close to his lips. He said embarrassing things which didn't help him focus. Any thoughts that came together were scattered by Daniel's soft voice on his skin.

Johnny, reached out, now that he was closer, finally, gently pulling him up, towards him, kissing him, interrupting Daniel's whispers.

Daniel's hand trailed down his side, hooking under his thigh and pushing one of his legs higher up, a little further apart.

"Still okay?" Daniel asked, pressing his forehead to Johnny's.

"Yeah," Johnny said pulling him back into the kiss, like he was starving, like he hadn't been kissed in centuries. Until Daniel pushed himself in and Johnny's head went back down to blanket with Daniel kissing his neck, one hand on his leg the other running along his torso, like he was trying to calm him.

"Let me know if I need to stop."

"Just, give me a second," Johnny covered his face, breathing carefully.

How Daniel was staying so still Johnny didn't know. Probably meditating or something. Maybe they could try meditating on the balance wheel back to back. He'd need to take meditation more seriously if that was the trick.

Daniel was quiet. Too quiet. Almost like he wasn't there. Though Johnny was acutely aware that he was there. He brought his hands down and saw Daniel, sitting back, breathing intently, eyes shut. He *was* meditating. Or close to it. It helped to know he wasn't the only one overwhelmed.

Johnny reached out gently to Daniel's hand, slipping his fingers between Daniel's, nodding when brown eyes met his. Daniel leaning down to kiss him again.

Johnny had been right. Daniel was stunning in the moonlight, in the firelight, under the stars together. He could see them all so easily, all the constellations they'd seen together at their first date to the observatory, which hadn't *felt* like a first date. They'd settled so comfortably with one another that it felt like the drawing Yuna had sent them.

An old married couple while also honeymooners at the same time. New and old all at the same time. Comfortable and still learning. Adjusting for one another.

A star shot across the sky and Johnny remembered someone had mentioned it.

A meteor shower.

He hadn't thought anything of it because the smog in LA and the lights usually meant there wasn't much to see. Or it'd be cloudy. It was always cloudy.

He'd never had a chance to see one, a shooting star, even though he'd always desperately looked.

All his wishes used to be the same, for his mother to be happy, to make friends. Hopeful at every birthday where his mother stuck a candle in whatever food they had. It felt like his wishes always went unanswered. Year after year. When he was older he hadn't known what to wish for.

Now he felt like he had everything he wanted. But he did know what he'd wish for.

For Daniel to be happy and safe.

To stay with him as long as possible.

To love him as long as he could.

Long past them being old and grey.

Chapter End Notes

Scampagnata means picnic
Eggplant Parmesan
croquettes
Quick Italian Cheers lesson

I was going to have them hang up the food in a bear bag but then realized it'd probably break all the stuff Daniel packed and read that it's outdated and people have gotten injured attempting it. But that's easily solved by food storage boxes that Sequoia National Park says they have at practically every campsite, so that solved that problem and made it much easier lol.

All the flowers Johnny was thinking of, some have multiple meanings, but here's what he was going for:
Camilla in pink (Longing For You)
Camilla in white (You're a Flame in My Heart)
Camilla in red (You're Adorable)
Red chrysanthemum (I love you)

Daffodils (Unequalled Love)
Daisies (Loyal love)
Heliotrope (Eternal love and Devotion)
Holly (Domestic happiness)
Honeysuckle (Bonds of love)
White jasmine (Sweet love)
Yellow lilies (Walking on air)
Morning glory (Affection)
Red roses (I love you)
Small sunflowers (Adoration)
Tulips in red (Passion, declaration of love)
Tulips in yellow (Sunshine in your smile)
Yarrow (Everlasting love)

The best prize of all

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny was usually quiet, so hearing him be loud in the woods was thrilling. Every sound Daniel got was like music to his ears. He wanted it to last forever, but he knew it wouldn't.

Johnny did shut his eyes at one point which worried Daniel but it was just for a split second, his gaze shifting to something beyond Daniel, past him.

After, he didn't want to move. Wanted to just be completely boneless. But he cleaned up and started to tug on Johnny figuring they should sleep in the tent but Johnny pulled him back. That stubborn immovable person. Kind of why he wanted to be like Bobby and be able to pick Johnny up and move him. Show him how it felt to have some giant of a man throw him over his shoulder like it was nothing. But Daniel was pretty sure he wouldn't get much taller than he was now, so his best bet was strength because when Johnny wanted to be like a boulder he would become one and couldn't be moved.

He was worried that if Johnny was too tired to move he'd catch a cold or something as it got cooler through the night when the fire went out. But he laid down next to Johnny like Johnny wanted, pulling the blanket around them and taking his hand.

"Look," Johnny said pointing up at the sky.

A streak of light shot across the sky.

"Did you see that?" Daniel gasped.

"Yeah."

Another shot across the sky. *That* was why he'd shut his eyes. He wanted to be a little annoyed that Johnny had gotten distracted, that his focus had left Daniel in that moment, but he'd wanted it to be romantic and he didn't think he could've asked for a better night. Good food, a beautiful location, just the two of them, and a meteor shower.

The problem now was that they couldn't come back to the woods

every single time. And it hadn't been a free woods.

He'd paid for all the permits to spend the weekend in the woods and to build a fire.

It wasn't necessarily cheaper than a hotel even.

Okay, it was cheaper than a *good* hotel.

A lot cheaper than the kind of hotel Daniel wanted to stay at. Which was why he'd put so much effort in. Even though Johnny slept on the beach and didn't complain about sleeping on the floor, he'd wanted to tell him he loved Johnny in a romantic way.

The guys had said Johnny had a tent, but Daniel hadn't known whether that was an emergency thing or if Johnny liked camping. So he'd wanted to up everything else. Get away from everyone and everything.

It was nice, the way Johnny pulled him back into his arms. He could almost fall asleep there. But he refused. He'd made the inside of the tent really nice. Like a nest and that nest was calling, it was warmer than the blanket on the ground.

Daniel should've pulled Johnny into the tent, but he hadn't been able to wait. It hadn't even crossed his mind. Plus he liked the idea of having sex under the stars. Their actual first time, which seemed to have gone well.

There were so many shooting stars.

"Is it a meteor shower?" Daniel asked tilting his head back to look at Johnny.

"Yeah."

"Can't believe you were watching a meteor shower instead of paying attention," Daniel said with a fake pout.

Johnny ruffled his hair playfully. "Just be happy I didn't interrupt you to show you. I was tempted to."

"Good to know I rank second to a meteor shower."

"You know that's not true," Johnny said.

He did.

He knew that Johnny wouldn't have let him do that if he hadn't trusted him. If he hadn't liked-no, loved him as much as he did. And Daniel kind of had known that Johnny loved him back on some level. Probably had for a long time if he sat back and looked back at their time together.

How much Johnny fussed over him from the start, tried to be less intimidating in everything he did, worried about scaring Daniel, worried any time he got hurt. Staying behind with him without looking disappointed while Daniel's knee was healing.

Any space Johnny retreated into, Daniel took up, until there wasn't any space left, clearly. Letting Daniel touch him everywhere, letting Daniel in, in more ways than one.

He rolled onto his side, looking at Johnny his hair all mussed, and fondly moved it from his forehead.

"I know."

The blue eyes he loved found his and his heart almost hurt.

Johnny loved him.

Accepted his love in return.

He wanted to move in with him, already was looking for places because he wasn't bogged down in paperwork related to the shop, wasn't doing their bookkeeping while also training for a tournament. He'd seen that opening that needed to be done and had done it, wordlessly, preparing in case because Daniel had been clear when Daniel hadn't realized he'd been clear.

He'd thought Johnny would want to continue to live at Mr. Miyagi's because it was so obvious how much he loved it there. How safe he felt. But he'd heard Daniel's complaints about privacy, about wanting somewhere just the two of them, the frustration of having on the weekends six guys in one room that barely fit all of them. And he'd just wordlessly picked up that thread that Daniel couldn't follow and started the process.

It was things like that.

The way Johnny didn't just listen to him but also *heard* him. Something that thrilled him from the start. Picked up the things that Daniel couldn't keep juggling and took care of them.

Grocery shopping when Daniel, dinner on the nights where Daniel got waylaid, did chores Daniel never in a million years would've expected Johnny to even know how to do.

All those daydreams seemed like a reality, something within his grasp. A place for him to put down roots, something he craved so much. He'd worried that it'd be hard to replant Johnny, to uproot him from Mr. Miyagi's, and maybe there'd be some adjusting. Trying to figure out what to do on nights where they both were busy and got home late, too tired to cook. Mr. Miyagi always cooked when neither of them did, but maybe there was an easy solution to that, take out. Simple solutions.

They'd work through any problem that came up together.

Daniel pushed himself up, looking back down at Johnny. "Let's go in the tent huh? So I can put out this fire? Before Smoky the bear comes and chides me for not preventing forest fires."

He watched Johnny drag his attention away from the stars and back to him.

"You okay?" Daniel asked.

He hadn't asked earlier, hadn't checked that he hadn't hurt Johnny. He'd thought Johnny had, well, he'd finished and sounded like he'd enjoyed it. But maybe he'd been overwhelmed afterward. Maybe having sex on the hard ground had been a bad idea. His knee was bothering him a little, who knew how Johnny was feeling. Maybe he hadn't moved from the spot because he'd pulled something or it'd hurt and he hadn't said anything. He'd told Johnny to tell him, but maybe he had kept it to himself like he kept-stop, talk to him.

"Are you hurt?" Daniel asked.

Johnny pushed himself up onto his forearms, the blanket slipping down to reveal all the red marks that would bruise later, he hadn't even realized he'd done that much.

"I'm not hurt," Johnny said looking at him amused. "I'm fine."

Not great huh? Daniel felt great. Practice makes perfect and-

Johnny was sitting up slowly, like he was reacquainting himself with his body. Thoughtful.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Daniel asked.

Maybe it'd been a big ask. He would've been fine with the roles reversed, figured that would happen eventually. But other than once Johnny followed Daniel's lead along the way so he just assumed it'd be best to show him first. Plus he'd wanted to do it...for a long time.

"You seem concerned so I'm just going slow," Johnny said. "We'll see if I'm sore in the morning but I seem fine at the moment."

"Did you hate it?"

There were things on Daniel's list he figured they'd try and might not like and that was fine, but he kind of expected this to not be one of them.

Johnny blinked giving him a look. "Daniel," He said softly, reaching out and pulling him into a soft kiss. "It was good. Which I thought you knew."

"Well you didn't move, so I thought-"

Johnny laughed softly. "I wanted to enjoy the stars with you. Then you got worried and I thought I should be careful getting up in case there was something else I didn't know or hadn't noticed. I'm going, but I'm taking this," Johnny said pushing himself up and wrapping the blanket over his shoulders, then dipping back down to crawl into the tent.

Daniel sat there a little stunned. It wasn't like he forgot Johnny was naked but he kind of forgot. They usually slept in t-shirts and shorts because while it was hot in LA they never knew if the guys would be over or Mr. Miyagi would come in and Daniel hadn't even computed that Johnny might not put his pajamas on. That he'd just go straight into the tent, unhurried and unbothered by being naked.

"You staying out there or something?" Johnny asked amused. "What's happening? Are *you* okay?"

Daniel scrambled up, putting the last of their stuff away.

Johnny was waiting for him, head in his hand laying on his stomach watching Daniel hurry.

That look.

Daniel felt the heat in his gut return, as he put out the fire.

When would they have an opportunity like this again? Maybe they could go again? Would that be too overwhelming? Would Johnny be okay with it? Could try a different position. Mark another one off the list. Spend the entire weekend going at it like rabbits.

He stepped carefully into the tent in the darkness, eyes adjusting to the moonlight without the fire, to the chill of the night air, Johnny had moved, curled up under the blankets, and as soon as Daniel zipped the tent shut warm hands pulled him down into another kiss.

In the morning he woke up and sat up trying to remember what the plan was.

He was going to heat up breakfast over another fire. They had enough wood to make another fire because Johnny had taken his wood gathering duties seriously and probably had procured too much. Then he'd planned for them to go hiking through the forest. There were specific trees he wanted to see and some falls and a pretty overlook. But Johnny looked so peaceful with his hair messed up and curled up, a sleeping Adonis by his side.

He wanted to spend their entire day in the tent enjoying each other. But then if Mr. Miyagi or anyone asked how their weekend went all Daniel would have to say for himself was they had a picnic. There needed to be a buffer. Things that they'd do as well. Otherwise, he might be too easy to read.

He leaned down kissing the top of Johnny's head, watched as he mumbled something in his sleep, waking up but not there yet, reaching out, arms going around Daniel's waist, pulling him back in. Daniel shifted back down, laying next to him, and kissed his nose.

"It's cold," Johnny said.

It was chillier than the valley but Daniel had packed with that in mind, but he supposed when he'd sat up a bunch of cold air had filled the void he'd left.

"Sorry, you hungry?" Daniel asked.

"Mmm," Johnny said burying his face in Daniel's neck. He felt lips on his neck.

There wasn't a rush. He was a little hungry and he needed to reheat the torta rustica he'd made with breakfast in mind. Which meant starting the fire again. But it could wait. It wasn't that late. They could still walk around the park, enjoy the ancient sequoias at least. Besides, it was nice to just be there with Johnny, the way his hand felt on his hip, a warm comforting weight.

His heart felt full in that tent, in the warmth of the sleeping bags and blankets he'd lugged from home, with Johnny. No threats or worries, no concerns about the tournament that he still didn't want to do but had to do. Had to stand up to his fears and show them he wasn't going to back down so that he could continue to have moments like this, where he could just go somewhere with Johnny and not worry about everyone he'd left at home, worried when his back was turned monsters wouldn't come and destroy it all like a toddler and a carefully crafted sandcastle.

He pulled back a little studying how peaceful Johnny looked.

"I love you," Daniel said softly, hand to Johnny's cheek, running his thumb over his cheekbone.

Blue eyes flicked open so awake Daniel nearly jumped.

"I love you too," Johnny said.

Daniel smiled kissing him then pulling away again. "Want to go hiking? Breakfast?"

"In that order?" Johnny asked with a frown.

"Breakfast first," Daniel said with an amused smile.

"Maybe we should get dressed first," Johnny said. "Did you pack clothes? Or just food?"

Daniel laughed. "I brought clothes."

"Did you pack *me* clothes?"

"Look for yourself," Daniel said rolling over and pulling the backpack towards Johnny.

Johnny sat up, wrapping one of the blankets around him, digging around in his backpack looking at what Daniel had packed. One of his sweaters, a green one, and a pair of dark jeans. He turned to his own

bag putting on layers, ending in his orange puffy jacket over another flannel and jeans.

"Going to open the tent, brace yourself," Daniel said leaning over kissing Johnny again, who was looking at his Walkman, eyes wide, but tilted his head up to kiss Daniel back. "Packed that in case you couldn't sleep."

Johnny had let the blanket fall from his shoulders and Daniel was tempted to not bother, they don't really need to go anywhere. They could stay right there, just drive around a little before leaving. That'd still count as seeing the woods right? If they never left their tent? No. They had to see them.

Pulling away was difficult but he did, stepping out into the brisk November morning.

It felt more real. Like it actually was November.

A taste of autumn in the air verging on winter. Cool and crisp.

He breathed it in and stretched, finished his morning routine, and started the fire back up carefully putting the pan the torta rustica was in into the fire.

It was so nice.

Johnny popped his head out of the tent dressed in the clothes Daniel had picked for him, dressed for warmth. Cozy.

He took his bag with him to finish getting ready.

When Johnny got back breakfast was done and Daniel had finished packing up the tent. He'd heated up water and was mixing instant coffee with it into mugs when Johnny sat down next to him.

"I didn't know you were so proficient at camping," Johnny said taking the mug offered to him.

"Used to go with my Dad and Mom, and then my cousins and aunts and uncles. We'd go at least every summer and fall," Daniel said. "What about you, you're the one with a tent and you did a good job setting up the fire."

"Ah, the tent was originally for emergencies," Johnny said. "Some teacher when I was younger said we need food, water, and shelter to

survive, so I made sure I always had some in the trunk of the Avanti. Then the guys liked camping so I'd go with them sometimes, and we'd have parties on the beach with bonfires. I like camping. It's nice."

Of course, it was from emergency preparedness. Everything was always so...sad. But at least Johnny did like camping and did have good memories of it. And they could keep adding to it. More new good memories, so that one of being prepared just in case, could become so distant it felt like a bad dream.

He pulled the pan with the torta rustica from the fire and carefully sliced it to put on plates. "Think of it like quiche, a cheesy, vegetable-filled layered pie with a little bit of egg. Ma puts salami in it but I went with ham because that was cheaper."

"Everything is delicious, like always," Johnny said after taking a bite.

Daniel smiled warmly. He asked Johnny about the apartments he'd looked at so far, what he wanted from an apartment, working out that dream list while they ate, cleaned up, put out the fire, and made sure they left nothing behind.

Johnny took all the bags from Daniel, stubborn as hell carrying it all back down to the Ford so that they could go straight to exploring and then go home.

Daniel tried three times to help Johnny carry things but he ducked out of reach each time, reminding Daniel that he'd said Johnny could carry it the way back. That he'd won the race, so he might as well get *something* out of it since it'd been too enjoyable to have felt like a lost bet. But Daniel followed him back to the Ford, hands in his pockets feeling like he had won the best prize he'd ever get. Johnny's heart.

With everything locked safely in the trunk of the Ford they headed out onto one of the trails, holding hands and looking up at the giant sequoia. They walked down the paths, stopping to look up at the one marked with a sign General Sherman. Johnny had grabbed a brochure at one of the buildings he passed and flicked it open, "It's the world's largest tree. It's 275 feet tall."

Daniel tilted his head back. He was so used to the tiny bonsai now that it was overwhelming to see a tree that big. That old. He felt tiny.

Johnny gave his hand a gentle squeeze and they continued on through the forest, looking at all the trees, just enjoying the walk, talking about apartments and trees and Johnny was asking him if he'd looked

at colleges or trade schools yet and when it was time to go it felt too soon. Though Daniel was tired, and pleasantly so. They sat in the Ford eating a quick lunch of leftovers before they left, driving back towards LA, the Valley, and Mr. Miyagi's home.

Chapter End Notes

torta rustica

275 feet is 83 m

Scattered to the Wind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

November passed quickly, too quickly as they tried to fit in as much time with Jessica before she left as possible. Daniel and Dutch went running with her every morning and Johnny met them for breakfast before they'd head off to their shops and Dutch to his classes.

At one of these breakfasts, Dutch was more jittery than normal. Like he'd downed 10 espressos before he'd sat down. He was listening to Daniel and Jessica talk about winter family traditions but looked like he was going to burst.

"Sorry," Johnny said interrupting a comparison of snow days and how high the snow got. "Dutch, you got something you want to say?"

He let out a breath, leaning forward excitedly as Jessica and Daniel blinked surprised and turned to them.

"I head out in March."

"Where to?" Johnny asked.

"Seoul."

"You got picked from your class?" Johnny asked.

"I did," he said smile small and fond. That little spark of being proud of himself. Waiting for someone else to be proud of him too. Happy for him.

Johnny wondered when the last time he'd seen his parents. When had he gotten the news? Had he been waiting for someone to tell? He'd worked so hard. He'd come over to chaperone with Korean textbooks, studying Hangul, working in little textbooks with more energy than Johnny had ever seen before. He'd asked Johnny to help him find books on Korea and they'd gone to a bookstore and filled up Dutch's arms with books.

Johnny stood up a big grin on his face. This couldn't be done in half measures. Dutch stood up and Johnny hugged him in a tight bear hug. "That's fucking great Dutch! You did it! Congratulations!"

Dutch was beaming when he pulled away in time for Jessica and Daniel's curiosity to turn their focus on a new topic. Dutch and his trip. A thousand questions, a flood he was more than happy to answer. He patted Dutch's back squeezed his shoulder and returned to his seat. Dutch sitting back down to answer the questions.

"Where are you staying?"

"Not sure yet. There's a two-week orientation in Incheon before we head out to Seoul."

"Where's Incheon?"

"It's an island near Seoul where the airport is."

"Are you going anywhere else?"

"My teacher has family on Jeju, so I think we're going to visit there. It's a volcanic island and you can hike the volcano, so I kind of want to do that. And there are mermaids."

"Mermaids?"

"Haenyeo, they're like all over 60 years old and don't use any gear to dive into the ocean to fish."

"Sounds like something Mr. Miyagi would find cool."

"Right?"

"What are you excited for?" Johnny asked.

Dutch thought about it for a while, then looked down at his coffee, tapping his fingers against the ceramics. "It kind of feels like everyone has...or...is going on these adventures. And maybe I don't do anything exciting while I'm there. But it'll be a chance for me to get out there and do something for me. Something I haven't- I traveled a lot as a kid with my parents but never got to enjoy it, just dragged from one spot to another and they were always busy, and I didn't want to travel when I got older unless it was with my friends. But I want to now. Because I think I can make it fun. I think I can meet new people and try new things and get better at the things I already know. Even if it's a small adventure I want to have one. Like everyone else."

Johnny waited until Dutch's eyes met his again and smiled, "It's going to be amazing Dutch. A wonderful adventure and you're going to have

a blast. I expect phone calls from time to time."

"Of course," Dutch said launching into a detailed explanation of the itinerary he had so far from his teacher.

It was bittersweet. Johnny was excited for him but he'd miss Dutch. But at least he was leaving after the tournament. It was starting to feel like they really were all parting ways. The guys still came up on the weekends, still trained with Daniel and Johnny.

Mr. Miyagi had come home from fishing one morning and saw them trying to spar with Jessica following along with a confused look on her face, and had laughed, carefully correcting stances and leading them all through kata. The look on the guys faces was a delight and Jessica loved it. And it was nice, nice to all be together in those moments, but when they weren't there, Johnny would find Daniel in the kitchen chewing on his lower lip looking at the calendar with a deep frown, counting down the days till that red circled day, lost in thought, tense.

Johnny did his best to pull him back into the now, to focus on their busy afternoons at the shop, all the kids who came because Mr. Miyagi had started doing classes and their parents always for some reason thought it was just for kids until they got hit with that same calming atmosphere that Mr. Miyagi exuded and then they sat with their kids following along and always left looking so much better than when they'd entered the shop, holding their kid's hand and their bonsai that they'd worked on together. Tried to bring him coffee while he poured over their books, doing the math and tallying everything up, or when he was on the phone calling suppliers to ask where shipments were or to order more. Bringing him and Mr. Miyagi lunch with Jessica who'd come and sit with them in the back and just talk.

It'd all be over soon, too soon.

Jessica's going away party came faster than Johnny was ready for it. They had dinner at Mr. Miyagi's with the guys and her, a traditional Okinawan meal that Mr. Miyagi painstakingly made. It made Johnny a little homesick for the island he'd only lived on for a month, of the friends there separated by an ocean.

They took her out dancing and then dropped her off at her apartment. They were supposed to leave, supposed to say their goodbyes there but it felt wrong. To just say goodbye in the dead of night. Johnny

took a look around and saw the same reluctance to leave mirrored in the faces around him.

"How about I make some tea?" Johnny asked.

That tearful look in Jessica's eyes blinked away.

"Uh, yes, thank you," she said directing him to where everything was.

It wasn't like she was leaving forever. Heading only to Ohio. But it felt so far away. Like she'd get swept away by the cornfields to never be seen or heard from again. He didn't want that to happen. For it not to be an end but a happy branching off the same tree they shared. Still within reach.

Wherever Daniel and he moved they'd have to set aside a lot of money for their phone bill. Calls from Kumiko in Tokyo, Yukie, Chozen, and Sato and the other villagers from Okinawa, Dutch in Seoul, Jessica in Ohio, and everyone else, all their friends scattered on the wind. They'd have to set up a calendar, a schedule to be home to hear about their adventures, the two of them sitting on the couch listening to the receiver together to hear about their newest adventures, hopefully, much tamer than their own had been so far.

He worked his way through the cabinet, picking out tea while the water boiled. He was going to miss this. Going to miss their cafe dates where they talked about anything and everything. Stopping by Earthworks to pick up pots for the bonsai. The couple of lessons Jessica had given them, to teach them how to do it themselves. Daniel had made a wobbly bowl and Johnny had attempted a vase. They weren't perfect, definitely handmade and they'd keep them for as long as possible because the memories of trying to learn how to do what Jessica did had been such a delight. There'd been so much warm laughter in that shop and it wouldn't be the same without her there. It would be like a splash of color would be gone, leaving everything a little greyer.

"Need help packing?" Johnny asked when he brought out the tray full of tea for everyone. He set it down, passing the tea out and pointing at the guys. "They packed up all of Daniel and his mother's things, as well as all of Mr. Miyagi's when their apartment complex was demolished and my stuff when I moved. And we packed them up to go to school. Practically professionals at this point."

Jessica smiled warmly at him. "Yeah, if you don't mind. I've got my clothes but I got to ship stuff back to Ohio. Stuff I wanna keep that

won't fit, you know?"

Johnny nodded.

They'd have to do this again at least twice more.

Once for him and Daniel and their new apartment when they picked it out and for Dutch for his trip to Seoul.

All of them would be on different paths, doing different things.

He was trying to focus on enjoying the moments and balance them with preparing for the future. For Daniel's birthday and the tournament and their new apartment.

He'd been shopping with his Mom, walking through furniture stores where she discussed all the things she'd learned moving into her own place. She offered to cosign so it'd be easier, though it already was easy when Johnny told the realtor, the same one they'd used for the shop that he could afford the down payments.

She'd looked at him suspiciously when she'd asked where he worked and he told her Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees.

She looked at the bonsai on her desk and then back at Johnny.

"My mom gives me an allowance," he said.

That didn't help, she'd folded her hands on her desk.

"Getting your own place is a big step."

"It won't be my own place-"

"Even with a roommate living on your own in LA isn't easy. It can get expensive, especially for all the things you want, even though you said Reseda is okay."

"I live for free at my current place and I have like no bills or debts, so I've just been saving my allowance and my paychecks," Johnny pulled out one of the brochures for expensive apartments he'd seen, setting the page down on her desk, tapping it.

She looked at it eyes wide like she was trying to figure out the best way to let him down gently and to tell him his aspirations were great but unrealistic.

"I've got enough to pay for that right now. On my own. No roommate needed. But it's not in the right area."

She looked at the apartment and then back up at him.

"Last time you were here-"

"My mom won her divorce," Johnny said with a shrug.

"Then why do you want to be in Reseda? We could move you to Malibu with this kind of money, or Brentwood park, or hell Paradise Cove Bluffs."

It had been a *long* conversation, but she'd finally understood and they were on the same page and now that Daniel was joining them to look it was a lot easier because he talked numbers and she knew to focus on rent and not the security deposit or a couple of months rent, to adjust for the kind of money Daniel actually would have to deal with, which opened a lot more doors. And Daniel looked so delighted, happy as they looked around at the apartments the relator took them too because they had already poured over so many places, nixing things that didn't work, trying for that wishlist Daniel had wanted. A place where they'd have a safe spot to park their cars, lots of natural lighting, an extra bedroom, a nice kitchen, as soundproof as possible.

Robust security.

They had a couple of other places to check out still but Daniel had ones he liked and it sounded like by 1986 they'd have their own place.

Johnny finished his tea and rolled his sleeves up to start packing the ceramics that Jessica wanted to take home, knowing in a few short months he'd be doing this again. And then again a few months after that. A lot of boxes were in his future. A lot of packing.

With the six of them helping Jessica it took only a few hours to pack up everything she wanted to keep.

They still didn't leave.

No one made a move to go.

"Mind if we take you to the airport tomorrow?" Johnny asked from his spot on the floor.

"That'd be nice," Jessica said softly. "My aunt's busy. She's coming up in a couple of days anyway. I was going to go on my own."

He was glad he'd asked. Glad they hadn't left. The thought of leaving her in the middle of the night to head to the airport on her own in the morning...it felt too sad. She needed a send-off. A reminder that despite a rough start she'd made friends who'd miss her. To remind her of all the good adventures they'd had together.

"We can play card games until then," Tommy said, pulling out a deck from his pocket.

Johnny laughed softly. "We also should probably get *some* sleep."

"That is what coffee is for," Jimmy said waving him off.

"Sleep is for the weak, who needs sleep?" Dutch asked with a smile taking the deck from Tommy's hands and shuffling it.

"Blackjack? Poker? Old maid?" Bobby asked.

"Let's start easy," Jessica said. "Blackjack."

"*Easy* she says," Dutch said with a laugh.

"Is go fish more your style?" Jessica asked with a grin.

"How about we make things interesting?" Daniel asked.

"How?" Johnny asked.

"Winner picks breakfast. Loser buys or makes it."

"I like it," Jessica said.

"You would not have said that six months ago before Dutch learned to cook," Bobby said with a laugh.

"The best I could do was toast," Dutch said with a shrug. "But now I make a mean omelet."

"You've also been learning to make Korean food from your teacher," Tommy said.

Dutch grinned. "My pajeon and japchae are getting quite good. But I doubt you want either for breakfast."

"What was the thing you made when you came to my house? That was good," Tommy asked.

"Bibimbap."

"Wait you cooked for Tommy? Why weren't we invited?"

"You guys had stuff to do at home and he held boards for me so I could practice and I accidentally kicked him, it was like apology cooking."

"Yeah, be glad it *wasn't* you. It fucking hurt. Dutch's kicks are killer now. I was black and blue for like a month."

"I still think it's unfair. I taught you how to make an omelet and now you're cooking more and I don't get to try it?" Bobby asked with a frown, tone exaggerated, mock hurt.

Dutch sighed, passing him the deck. "Fine, give me a damn minute to see what Jessica's got in her kitchen still."

"I've actually got a lot, my aunt said she'd take the leftovers. So I didn't worry about it," Jessica said.

They played a round of blackjack before Dutch came back with a flat pancake-looking thing with slices of green that he cut up and a sauce.

"What's that?" Jimmy asked. "Smells good."

"Pajeon, it's a green onion pancake. Though there are different ones, but with what Jessica had, this is what I could make," Dutch said.

The look on his face was neutral but Johnny could tell he was nervous for them to try it.

Johnny took a piece, dipped it, and popped it into his mouth.

He smiled at Dutch. "It's really good."

Dutch grinned, relaxing and sitting down to enjoy the wave of compliments and to be dealt into the next round.

They played until well after midnight, Jessica beating all of them until there were cries that she had to be cheating and she laughed delighted saying they were just upset they'd lost to someone with better luck.

She wanted pancakes from the cafe down the street for breakfast and

Johnny lost.

They fell asleep in the living room near the door on the floor. An unspoken agreement, with Jessica helping Johnny pass out blankets and pillows.

Daniel curled up next to him under one of the blankets. He'd had a sad fond look on his face the whole night.

Johnny kept holding his hand under the table while they'd sat around playing and when the lights went off he ran his fingers gently up and down Daniel's arm that was around him. Goodbyes weren't easy, and Daniel had already said too many in his life. Which was why Johnny was determined they'd see Jessica again. He'd already gotten her new-old address and phone number and put them in the book by the phone. They'd stay in touch for sure. They'd visit her in Ohio. No more goodbyes.

In the morning he gently kissed the top of Daniel's head when his alarm went off to go get breakfast.

Daniel rubbed at his eyes, determined to come with him even though Johnny whispered to him that he could keep sleeping.

But it was Daniel and he was stubborn, so they got ready and headed out around the sleeping guys and down to the cafe where Johnny had met Jessica all those months ago, ordering the fancy pancakes they'd added to the menu and the stuff the guys had wanted. And coffee. Lots of coffee.

The lady working chatted with them warmly while they waited during the sleepy morning.

They filled up a bag with breakfast and their hands full of trays of coffee and headed back.

"I'm going to miss her," Daniel said softly.

"We'll visit."

"Ohio?" Daniel asked wrinkling his nose.

"Maybe after Chicago?" Johnny asked. "That pizza you're willing to try but also don't want."

Daniel sighed and nodded. "We'll visit her. But she better also visit."

"I'm sure she will," Johnny said gently bumping his shoulder against Daniels before they climbed back up the steps to the apartment and set up breakfast, slowly waking everyone up. They sat around eating, quietly, drinking their coffee until it was time to go.

They took Dutch's van and dropped off all her boxes at the post office, before driving her to the airport.

Johnny felt for a moment that it was like Okinawa again, awkwardly standing around, but this time he wasn't leaving.

"You'll call?" Dutch asked pulling away from their hug.

"Until you go to Seoul," Jessica said with a frown.

"I'll send you a phonecard," Bobby said with a laugh, "So you can call and bother him like we're all going to while he's over there."

"Thanks."

"I look forward to our next pie war," Bobby said hugging her.

"You'll let us know if you need anything right?" Tommy asked when it was his turn.

She smiled. "Promise. And you'll let me know of the adventures these weirdos get into right?"

"Always," Tommy laughed.

"Let us know how your classes go and if that boyfriend fucks up again," Jimmy said.

"And you'll let me know how things go with Jennifer?"

Johnny gave her a big hug when she came to him picking her up. "Safe travels, call when you get home safely."

She had tears in her eyes. "Take good care of Daniel and all of them will you?" she whispered.

"Of course. I always try to. And I'll keep you updated."

"You better."

He set her back down and she turned to Daniel, hugging him fiercely. "Kick Barnes's ass for me."

He laughed softly. "I will."

After a few more hugs she turned with her suitcase and waved heading off into the airport.

"What do we do now?" Dutch asked.

"Focus on the tournament," Daniel said with a sigh, running a hand through his hair.

"That we can do," Bobby said with a smile, arm around Daniel's shoulder and another around Dutch's, turning them towards the van. "But first, let's do something fun. How about the beach? Just an hour?"

Johnny smiled softly. Bobby didn't want them to get bummed. He got that. He just needed a little help, because they would cry if they didn't get going now. He threw his arm around Jimmy and Tommy's shoulders.

"I think that sounds great. Ice cream maybe?"

It was cheap. What you do for kids who are sad. But they perked up. Ice cream and the beach. They were California boys, after all, they couldn't stay too sad if the beach and ice cream was promised, or at least they could at least get there and be sad later.

He'd buy them all ice cream, however much it took to help.

He felt like he'd need at least a gallon himself.

He glanced back, trying to spot one last glimpse of Jessica, but she'd already disappeared into the crowd.

Maybe two gallons.

Chapter End Notes

Haenyeo
Hallasan (the volcanic mountain Dutch wants to hike on Jeju)
pajeon

Overwhelmed

December rolled around and Daniel was so focused on the upcoming tournament and training every second he wasn't working at the shop that he just didn't think about anything else.

Silver was looming in the future like a giant storm cloud and it was hard to see past it the closer they got. It was hard to focus on anything in the now.

Plus Jessica was gone.

He still saw the guys on the weekends and Dutch went running with him but he missed her.

They all did.

But he felt like there wasn't enough time to get everything he needed done. He had applications for families who wanted to drop their kids off to study bonsai. He had to make class lists to give to Mr. Miyagi. He had people he had to call. Sellers who weren't sending plants on time. Or who forgot deliveries. He had to field calls about the article that wanted to know more than he thought was necessary about Mr. Miyagi. Or people who wanted to know more about the shop in general. Hours were fine, orders were fine. But nosy people weren't. And maybe, at a different time Daniel would happily sit there and chat away with a stranger over the phone who mispronounced Mr. Miyagi's name for the fifteenth time even though Daniel corrected them every time. But he was tired.

Add to that practicing? He got up early to run with Dutch. Did kata in the evenings after work after getting home, sparred with Johnny with Mr. Miyagi around or Dutch.

He did like that. Johnny would strategize, shift out of the way, adjusted in the moment. It was a challenge every time and Daniel knew he was getting better, but he was starting to wonder how he'd ever won in the first place and that worried him. If it'd been a fluke the last two times then what would happen with a guy out for his blood?

It felt like his life was a game of Jenga and every time he had to do anything he was adding a wooden block to the top in the hopes that the whole thing wouldn't come crashing around him.

After work one night Johnny drove him home in the Avanti but didn't head to Mr. Miyagi's. He was driving them south, away, in the wrong direction.

It took a while to notice.

"Where are we going?" Daniel asked and Johnny laughed.

"You *just* noticed?"

"Well, I don't normally pay attention to where we're going. What's happening?"

"What's tomorrow?" Johnny asked.

"I don't know Wednesday? A shipment of new trees for Mr. Miyagi to make into bonsai?"

Had they made plans? Shit had he forgotten something important?

"The *date* Daniel?"

"I don't know."

Of fucking course he forgot something important. He wracked his brain trying to remember anything on the calendar and couldn't.

"Tomorrow is December 18th. Ring any bells?" Johnny asked glancing at him looking amused.

"No."

"Your birthday you dork," Johnny said laughing. "You forgot your own birthday?"

"I-" he had. He really had.

"Where are we going?" Daniel asked.

"You'll see," Johnny said, shaking his head amused. "You *clearly* need a break."

"I don't need a break, I need to keep training the tournament-"

"Daniel, you need a break before *you* break. The tournament is a big deal and I know that. But you can take your birthday off from training to spend time with your boyfriend and let him try to spoil you."

Daniel started to protest but swallowed it back down.

Protesting *that*, whatever Johnny had planned, would be like shooting himself in the foot.

Johnny had clearly planned something for him and that was well worth focusing on instead. He was overwhelmed on every front. He did need a break. A nice change of pace. Johnny was right.

Daniel had paid attention to nothing but training with Mr. Miyagi and the guys and Johnny. Working through strategy and going to the library with Johnny to read through their sections on karate and strategy. It was exhausting.

He was exhausted. He wanted to just get everything over with. Just pick him out a bed at the local hospital and get it ready. Get the ER team ready and have the ambulance on standby. He wasn't ready but he was ready for it to be done. The time leading up to it was torture. Which...knowing Silver might've been part of the point.

Johnny pulled the Avanti up in front of a well-lit building and parked.

He grabbed two bags from the trunk and then motioned for Daniel to follow.

It was a hotel.

A *nice* hotel.

Johnny talked to the receptionist and got their key leading Daniel to the elevator.

They kept going up.

The doors opened and he led Daniel down a hall, opening a door with the key he'd been handed like it was no big deal by the receptionist, like 18-year-old kids just showed up all the time to book rooms at their fancy hotel.

Maybe they did. Maybe kids from the Hills did stuff like this. Just dropped everything in the middle of the week to stay at a hotel. Maybe this was the type of life the guys led. Tired of being at home? Stay at a fancy hotel a half-hour away. Daniel wasn't even sure if it was a half-hour. He'd been so lost in thought. Going through his to-do list in his head that he hadn't noticed until they were nearly there that they'd gone in the wrong direction, that nothing was familiar. Hadn't

even known the date.

Daniel took a few steps into the room, letting the door shut behind him, and then stopped. It was like an apartment. There was a living room space and doors. A balcony. It was a suite. Daniel had never stayed in a suite before.

There were also flowers everywhere.

Red roses, tulips, and a whole lot Daniel didn't even have a clue what they were.

"Johnny what did you do?"

Johnny was setting their bags down on a coffee table in front of a cozy-looking sofa in front of a TV. When was the last time Daniel had watched TV?

With his mother. Before Okinawa.

He wanted to curl up on that couch and not move, flicking through more channels than he'd had at South Seas. Maybe more than he'd ever had access to in his life.

There were plush robes hanging up and slippers.

"Well I was going to pick out 19 flowers, but went with 19 bouquets instead because I couldn't decide," Johnny said. "You haven't told me your favorite flower yet, so I just-" he trailed off motioning to all the bouquets.

Ali had given him a flower on Halloween, but no one had ever given him a bouquet except maybe his mom for graduation, never more than one, hell not 19 all at once.

What was going to happen when he turned 50? Was Johnny going to get him 50 bouquets? There'd be nowhere to go. The ratio of flowers to people would just be overwhelming. Where would the guys sleep? On a bed of flowers? Even they might complain about that.

He'd have to start saving now to make sure their home was big enough. Get the apartment and then immediately switch to saving for a house.

Was he supposed to take all of these home?

It'd be a waste to leave them.

But was there enough space at Mr. Miyagi's house for all of them?

He'd have to leave some in the shop.

He walked up to one full of red roses and smelled, walking from bouquet to bouquet, smelling them.

"I also booked you a spot in the spa tomorrow," Johnny said. "And we have dinner reservations at the hotel restaurant."

It was too much. Too many flowers, too nice of a hotel, hell a spa? Johnny did know that he'd have been happy at some flea-ridden hotel right?

Okay maybe not. Daniel did like nice things. But he also could handle not nice things. A middle ground. But Johnny had gone straight for the stars. He leaned over a vase full of lilies feeling tears prick at his eyes. A spa sounded nice, a break sounded nice.

"What about the shop? Mr. Miyagi can't handle shipment day on his own yet and Jessica's in Ohio," Daniel said.

"Dutch is covering for us. Mr. Miyagi knows and Dutch is going to be there first thing to help out," Johnny said. "We have the day off."

"We have nowhere we need to be?" Daniel asked in disbelief.

"Nope."

"Nothing we need to do?"

Surely there was something they had to do, something they'd missed. There were always things to do. Bills to pay. Calls to make. Orders to fill.

"Nope."

Daniel turned it over in his head a couple of times.

Nowhere he had to be, no training.

Just the two of them.

It'd been well over a month since the last time it'd been just the two of them and now with the tournament fast approaching he thought they wouldn't be able to get away again any time soon.

Not until it was over.

And it was about to hit and hit **hard**.

All that stress. It was building up.

The fear of facing Barnes in front of a crowd.

Seeing Silver again.

He took a deep breath trying to hide how shakey it felt.

It'd be nice to be away from it all again, to have dinner with Johnny somewhere nice.

The problem was he was dressed for work, which meant dirt.

"Did you by chance pack me anything nice in my bag to wear for our dinner date?" Daniel asked turning and walking towards their bags.

Johnny shifted, hands in his pockets.

"You dress up when you go out to eat with my Mom, so I picked one of those. I think it looks nice, but I've been told my fashion sense is abysmal."

Daniel would have to disagree with whoever had told Johnny that, but maybe he was biased.

He liked Johnny in everything he wore or didn't wear. Hmm that might be on the table for their day off.

He found one of his nice button-ups carefully packed and smiled warmly at Johnny.

"Let me go change and then dinner? Is that what you have planned?"

"It's anything you want to do, it's your birthday."

"Then dinner," Daniel said turning to find which of the doors led to the bathroom.

He took a guess and it paid off.

The bathroom was massive.

He'd never been in a hotel room that had a living room.

He hadn't even seen the bed yet.

He was stunned.

Everything was beautiful and massive.

The bathtub was huge and there were bath salts and oils, a little list they recommended with ratios for relaxation, for softening skin, to be soothing.

He changed, messed with his hair for a little bit, and washed his hands getting rid of any dirt underneath his nails.

He'd wondered why Johnny had looked so nice. He always looked nice, but he'd dressed up for work, black slacks, and a button-up, shiny shoes. Like he'd forgotten *where* he worked.

He'd somehow managed to stay nice which was a feat in and of itself. But he'd just spent the day helping Mr. Miyagi and carrying bonsai to people's cars. He'd wondered why Johnny had been adamant about driving Daniel to work.

He couldn't believe he'd forgotten his birthday and had missed all the signs of Johnny being up to something. The button-up and shoes at work should've been a tip-off. The cufflinks. Like he was waiting out the clock till they could leave to whisk Daniel off to their important event.

Which was a hotel. Privacy.

He'd booked a day at the spa for tomorrow.

Relaxation.

Things Daniel wanted but hadn't had a chance for.

He looked nice, it was the kind of look he picked out himself when he was going to meet Johnny's mom. Some of the places they met were nice. Fancy. With valet service.

Daniel always told them he'd park his own car because he couldn't afford the valet service, but he looked forward to his time with Ms. Lawrence. Liked sitting with her and trying new places. It was an excuse to dress up and hang out. And she always was adamant about paying.

He'd felt bad at first but then she'd given him a look the first time

they'd tried a more expensive place and he'd tried to find the cheapest thing on the menu.

"Part of the fun of being a divorcee is doing things that would make Sid roll in his grave."

"Did he die?" Daniel asked eyes wide, shocked that no one had mentioned it earlier.

She laughed.

"No, but he'd hate me going out to a place like this for brunch and taking anyone under the age of 40 he wasn't trying to schmooze, and it's a *delight*. A delight to eat something more than egg whites for breakfast and salads or juice for lunch. So please let me pay, when I pick a place like this, get what you want."

Daniel had struggled with that for a few minutes. Not sure what to say. "Only if you split it with me," Daniel said.

She'd studied his face and then nodded. "Deal."

Every time they ordered two things and split them.

Something sweet and something savory. Or whatever weird thing they found on the menu that they had to know what it was.

It helped. But he was determined that if he got to a spot where he could afford a place like that he'd be taking her to lunch or dinner.

As thanks for always being there. For listening to him talk her ears off for hours without any complaint.

Johnny smiled warmly at him when he walked out and held out his hand.

Ever since Daniel had confessed he noticed more the quiet ways Johnny told him he loved him. It was a look that shined through his whole face, in his eyes, and in his smile when he held out his hand, it was how he would notice what Daniel was doing at the shop and helped or get him something to drink or snack on, it was how he'd on slow days, or really slow moments because they hadn't really had a slow day yet, Johnny would sit next to him like there was nowhere else he needed to be, nowhere he wanted to be except next to Daniel, it was waiting for Daniel in the mornings so they could go together, the way he leaned against his car or the Ford.

Now though he was shouting it without making a sound.

The room, the flowers, he was pretty sure once he got those 19 bouquets home and sat down with Johnny's book of flowers he'd go weak in the knees.

Anyone else and they'd just be pretty flowers, but with Johnny he knew they meant how he felt.

All the sentiments he was struggling to say. But it was how he was looking at Daniel like *he* was the luckiest man on earth, which felt silly because Daniel was, they couldn't both be, could they?

He took Johnny's hand.

He'd listened a little too damn well to Daniel. Knew how exhausted he was, how much he'd wanted to get away like it was an itch in his skin that he just couldn't do anything about, how he'd been dreading making dinner that night because he was so damn tired. Everything in him screamed that after the tournament things would be different. He just hoped, clung to it like a lifeline, desperate that things would be for the better. That he'd finally be able to breathe again.

Special Occasions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maybe it was too much. He had a lot planned, for the day, for the weekend. But he excused it because there was a lot that they'd wanted to do that they just hadn't had time for. They hadn't gone out to eat together on a date in a long time, Daniel always looked at hotels like he wanted to stay in one even though they lived in LA and were only a half-hour away, talked about it sometimes, and so many other things.

So Johnny had asked his Mom what the best place was to take Daniel to relax.

She'd suggested Bel-Air.

It was expensive, but after everything Daniel had been through it was worth it. Especially with how happy he looked.

Sure he expected an earful on how much it'd cost. But he just wouldn't say.

He'd never let Daniel see a bill or price.

Easy.

Dinner was courses, a set menu that he'd already paid for, so it wouldn't be a problem.

Same with the spa.

The maître d' met them at the front of the restaurant and took them to their reserved table.

Daniel was looking around at the photographs on the walls and then turned back to Johnny smiling warmly. He half expected Daniel to hook his leg around Johnny's like he had at Spago but he didn't. He knew Johnny wasn't going anywhere.

It felt like it'd been forever since they went to Spago. Too long since they'd had a dinner date.

No menu was brought out just the course list. No pricing.

Daniel studied it with a frown.

"Wait, why aren't there any numbers? What are you getting?"

"It's a set," Johnny said. "We get all of it."

Daniel's eyes widened and he looked up at Johnny horrified.

"That's too much food."

"Some of it will be small. I also told them it's your birthday so you'll get a second dessert."

Daniel's hand had been hovering over the basket of bread they'd been brought and he brought his hand back.

"Eat whatever you want and however much you want. If you don't like something, don't worry about it."

Daniel nodded eyes back on the menu curiously going over it before the first course.

A cold soup was brought out on a bowl of dry ice so the whole thing smoked, crackled, and popped and Daniel stared at it brown eyes so big, playing with the dry ice with the edge of his spoon intrigued almost as much as he seemed interested in eating the soup, running his fingers through the fog that flooded the air around him with wonder.

Once the ball got rolling it didn't seem to stop.

They were brought a tiny salad all wrapped up in a slice of cucumber like it was a bite-size salad and Johnny carefully cut it into smaller pieces watching with almost a laugh as Daniel pulled the toothpick holding it together loose and popped the whole thing into his mouth. Definitely easier than what Johnny was doing. Smarter.

Course after course came, with a sorbet palate cleanser part of the way through.

It was fun to sit with Daniel as he studied everything before him, then glanced over at the set menu, trying to piece it all together, tasting it slowly, thoughtful. Telling Johnny how he thought it was made, anything even remotely close he'd had of in his life.

It'd been a while since he'd seen Daniel that animated.

Ever since Jessica had left, ever since that date circled on the calendar came closer and closer Daniel had gotten more serious, quieter.

Johnny knew it was going to be a nightmare. If he had his way Silver and Barnes would already be in jail, banned from ever stepping foot in the Valley. He'd already have started the Rube Goldberg machine he'd created. But Daniel was prepared to fight. Though Johnny knew he didn't want to fight. Daniel didn't want to even step foot on that mat again. But he was grimly determined. Worried about Mr. Miyagi, and the shop, about Johnny. All the things he wanted to protect, forgetting that it flowed both ways, that Mr. Miyagi cared and also worried about Daniel.

He wasn't alone, but sometimes Daniel drifted, lost alone at sea until Johnny reached out, leading him carefully back to shore. He hadn't pulled away but had pulled more inward, quieter, and Johnny blamed Silver for it, blamed Barnes.

But now, now he was all smiles. He was eating his main course, talking about the proper way to season vegetables which the chef had done. Full of praise, more awake and alive than he'd been in weeks.

Dessert was eclairs and Daniel's second dessert, his birthday dessert which they wouldn't tell Johnny over the phone, was a chocolate soufflé.

He told Johnny about some time his mother had tried to make one in Jersey and how he hadn't been allowed to move through the house for what felt like hours for fear of it sinking, the way his mother fussed over it.

After dinner and dessert they headed back up to their room. Daniel grabbed their set menus and a packet of matches on their way out, arm hooked in Johnny's.

They had the elevator to themselves on the way back up to their room and Daniel kissed him warmly.

"Too much food?" Johnny asked thinking back to when they'd gone camping over a month ago and all the food Daniel had made for that. Maybe he'd done the same thing.

"Yes, but it was delicious."

"What do you want to do now?" Johnny asked as they stepped off onto their floor, getting the key ready.

"Watch TV?" Daniel asked. Like he wasn't sure if Johnny liked watching TV.

"Sounds good," Johnny said opening the door. "Why don't you pick something. I'm down for anything, except a horror film."

Daniel scooped up the remote and dropped down on the couch with a bounce looking pleased.

Johnny sat down next to him, arm behind Daniel on the couch, watching as Daniel flipped through channels.

They'd never watched TV together he realized with surprise.

Johnny wasn't sure if Mr. Miyagi even had a TV.

He never saw the man watching it.

Johnny used to watch shows with the guys. Weekly watch parties, sometimes with Ali.

Growing up they hadn't been able to afford one and he'd felt lost among the ways his classmates used to find common ground. He hadn't seen nearly anything they talked about. He didn't know the characters they drew. Unless it was from a book. But they didn't know the characters from his books unless they'd been adapted and then they were different from how he'd imagined them. It didn't connect.

Sid had several TVs and at first, he sat Johnny down in front of them telling him proudly which shows he worked on but then Johnny never could find where the invisible line was. Between when he watched too much TV or was in the way and why didn't he sit in front of one of the nice TVs like other kids? It was constantly shifting. Eventually, Johnny gave up, read his books, and stayed out of the mansion as much as possible.

Daniel started off leaning against him when he found a show he wanted to watch and then after a while sunk down to rest his head on Johnny's lap. Johnny ran his fingers through Daniel's hair watching the show.

It was difficult to not freeze up in fear of the future, of knowing what was coming and being unable to stop it.

Johnny wished he could trade places with Daniel. To take this one fight off of his hands, off his shoulders. It was so heavy, so painful, all the safety nets were gone, the lines had been crossed and it was bound to be worse.

Johnny didn't know what he'd do during the tournament. Someone would have to hold him in the audience, keep him back, stop him from punching Barnes in the face or Silver.

He didn't want to go. He didn't want to watch. But he also had to. If he wasn't there it'd be a million times worse. Plus he had to start that machine. Get the ball rolling when it was time.

But he didn't want to see Daniel get hurt.

There was no way to walk onto that mat and leave unscathed.

Johnny never had, no one ever had.

Every tournament ended with the guys fixing up their injuries. Even in the tournaments where Johnny did his best, the times he'd won, he still had to sit and bandage his hands, his feet, put ice packs to bruises.

He always ached the following day. But the comfort of winning, of having done his best and it being good enough, got him through the pain, at least until he'd see Kreese again. Until Kreese squashed that feeling by telling him all the things he'd done wrong. How it *wasn't* perfect. Like he never had won a shiny trophy or beat anyone else.

There was something to doing your best and winning. Satisfying. And if Daniel was walking into that tournament Johnny would cheer him on. But this was stacked against him, a rigged game, twisted for the utmost bloodshed and pain.

Maybe they'd get a TV. Maybe they'd sit around a couple of times a week and watch a show they liked, maybe they'd get a VCR and rent movies to watch and make popcorn.

After a couple of episodes, Daniel sat up and stretched turning off the TV looking satisfied.

Relaxed in a way he hadn't seen Daniel in well over a month. He picked up the glossy brochure about the spa and sunk back into the cushions. It'd explain the facial, the massage, the hot stones, the wraps that were all part of the package. The choices he'd have to make like

what kind of stuff he wanted put on his face or what type of massage he wanted.

"I'm going to get ready for bed," Johnny said.

"Okay," Daniel said flicking through the pages.

Johnny picked up his bag and headed off to the bathroom, grabbing the robes along the way.

He hung up the robes on the back of the door and set his bag on the countertop staring at the large tub.

Johnny started to flick on the shower then stopped, plugged the tub and filled it with warm water, adding salt and oil. It felt nice when he tested the waters and he walked over to the door, opening it.

He stripped and sunk into the warm water.

It was like a well-laid trap.

If the hotel room wasn't too big, if Daniel wasn't too engrossed in the brochure or if he didn't turn on the TV again.

Daniel had hinted at wanting to bathe together on multiple occasions so he'd leave it as an option.

Johnny was still trying to learn how to enjoy baths.

He used to when he was little. It was like a treat. He had hazy memories of their first apartment and bubble baths and her laughing, piling bubbles on his head like a hat, trying to see how tall she could get them.

He preferred fast showers because he could be in and out and going.

A bath was letting your guard down. But he hadn't had his guard up, really up in so long, but some habits were harder to break than others.

How was he supposed to make it look normal? An easy invitation? To not look disappointed if he waited too long, should he call out to Daniel?

He figured Daniel would see the door open, investigate and Johnny wouldn't even really have to invite him in.

He leaned his head back and shut his eyes.

He should've offered.

It shouldn't have been hard to say *I'm going to take a shower, or a bath, want to join me?*

But it felt weird.

Embarrassing.

Maybe he should switch it over to a shower and just chalk it up as a loss.

He opened his eyes ready to lean forward and jumped at the brown eyes looking at him from the edge of the tub.

"You've gotten quieter," Johnny managed trying not to show how startled he was.

Sneaky.

Johnny was used to listening to the creaky floorboards of Mr. Miyagi's where he could hear Daniel anywhere he went, not the modern tile of the hotel.

If Daniel realized he could sneak up on Johnny in the hotel there'd be no peace.

Daniel leaned over and dipped his fingers in the water like he was leaning out of a boat on a lake, or on the water's edge somewhere, not a bathtub choosing a spot between Johnny's thighs.

Maybe Johnny miscalculated.

"You want company?" Daniel asked innocently.

Innocent as a man caught holding a bag of money outside of a bank and the plans to steal it in his own handwriting in the other hand.

Johnny shifted back trying to look more at ease and less nervous than he felt. "Yes."

Daniel shifted to sit on the edge of the tub unbuttoning his shirt, unhurried.

Johnny wanted to grab him and pull him into the water but he waited while Daniel carefully folded his clothes and set them aside before his eyes turned back to Johnny, taking in everything before turning

carefully, thoughtful. He stuck his feet in the water but didn't get in.

"You going to join me?" Johnny asked.

"I'm trying to decide what I want."

"Okay."

"Leaning against you would be nice, but then I won't see your face."

"A true dilemma," Johnny said with a laugh.

Daniel turned to him, leaning down with his hand on Johnny's shoulder and kissing him, before sinking the rest of the way down, turning, back to Johnny, leaning against him.

"Maybe we should get a bath this big in our apartment," Daniel said thoughtfully, shifting so he could lean his head against Johnny's chest.

Johnny wrapped his arms around him.

"We could try," Johnny said trying to think of which apartment had nice baths from the ones he'd looked at. "Or we can just stay at hotels every once in a while."

"While visiting people sure," Daniel said running his fingers over Johnny's arm that was leaning over the side of the tub.

"I mean we can do this," Johnny said motioning towards the suite.

"It's too expensive," Daniel said tilting his head back to look up at Johnny. "Special occasions."

"A special occasion can be anything," Johnny said with a grin. "Saw a cool looking bird is a special occasion. Saw a kid tie their shoe for the first time."

Daniel laughed softly. "I mean like this, this is fine."

"Ah I see, *Tuesdays*," Johnny said.

Daniel groaned. "You know what I mean."

"I do," Johnny said leaning his head down and kissing between Daniel's neck and shoulder. "But you should expand your special occasion definition. I want to celebrate everything with you."

"Like what?" Daniel asked, voice soft and low.

"I want to celebrate getting our apartment. I want to celebrate when you solve whatever happened to that shipment of trees that got lost. When you figure out how to deal with parents that are annoying. When you help Mr. Miyagi figure out "What is that sound?" in one of his old cars. When you master a new kata or move in karate. When you pick a school. When you get into a school. When you pass a test. When you fail a test. When-"

"Everything," Daniel breathed. "Got it."

Johnny wrapped his arms around him.

"It's all cause to celebrate."

Daniel shifted to look back at him. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Most of that was celebrating me. We can't just celebrate every little thing with me and not you."

"Why not?"

"It's uneven," Daniel said turning back.

Johnny rested his head on Daniel's shoulder. "Hmmm. We can celebrate when my plan works."

Daniel pulled away twisting to look at him. "A plan you won't tell me about."

"You've got enough on your plate."

"But I'm worried about you."

"And I'm worried about *you*."

Daniel sighed. "This is why I should've faced you."

"We'll have to get a tub you can move around as you like," Johnny said with a soft laugh.

"Silver is dangerous Johnny. Everyone warned me and I fucked up and now you're-you're what lighting matches and throwing them at him in the hopes he just catches on fire?"

Johnny tilted his head thoughtfully.

"You know I didn't try that method. Maybe I'll give that a shot."

Daniel huffed, splashing him with water.

Johnny caught him and pulled him back against his chest, wrapping his arms around him, so he couldn't move, just enough strength to make it more difficult.

"Listen, let's not worry about Silver or his friends tonight or tomorrow? Not worry about plans, or kata, or karate, or what I may or may not be doing. I know saying don't worry about it or don't worry about me doesn't do anything. It won't help you. You can't magically stop worrying. I can't magically stop worrying. Instead, let's just try to focus on something else as much as we can. Let's make another list."

"Another list?" Daniel asked.

"Let's go places. When we're not busy. I like this getaway once a month at least. Last month we went camping, this month we're here. I know we want to visit Jessica at some point, do we want to drive there or fly?"

Daniel got quiet.

Johnny tilted his head to try and see him better. He was chewing on his bottom lip thoughtfully and then brought a hand up to his lips.

"Let's drive. We could stop at places along the way."

"Perfect. Okay, next. How do you feel about going to Korea?"

"To visit Dutch?"

"Yeah. I mean not right away, but after he's gotten acclimated, knows his way around?"

"Will that be expensive?"

"Don't know. We might not have to worry about that one."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the guys also were talking and want to go. His parents might get our tickets. Or...well...the plane."

"They have their own plane?" Daniel asked turning around so suddenly that Johnny barely avoided getting headbutted.

"The peacocks didn't scream ridiculous wealthy?" Johnny asked amused.

"I mean they did but he drives that van, it's...hideous."

Johnny laughed softly. "Yeah, but it's a *good* van."

Johnny had gone with Dutch to pick out the van. He originally looked at small expensive sports cars. The kind that Johnny never even dreamed of affording but knew Sid had several of. Things that went fast and he remembered Dutch asking to test drive one. Johnny sitting in the fancy seats with him while his hands wrapped around the steering wheel.

His parents were supposed to take him. Had promised to be there, his 16th birthday. But instead, they'd sent someone with a blank check to him. Told him to get whatever car he wanted.

"Could race in it," Dutch had said a wild look in his eyes, a smile that was scarier than friendly.

Johnny could see it.

Dutch racing down desert roads outside the city, going as fast as he could trying to leave everything behind. All those feelings. Everything that was confusing. Everything that hurt. The loneliness. To just disappear on the road, to go nowhere but as fast as possible. No destination meant not stopping to let those feelings catch up. Outrunning everything.

It'd been the nicest test drive of Johnny's life. But Johnny knew with a car like that, luxurious and fast Dutch wouldn't last. He'd keep going until something else stopped him. A patch of ice, some armadillo or tumbleweed in the dark.

A race that would lead him into the wrong lane at the wrong time. It'd be pouring oil on the already raging fire that Dutch barely contained as is.

"Can't fit a lot in it," Johnny said carefully trying not to sound like the car was bad.

It was a beautiful car. He just thought it was Dutch signing a death

sentence.

Dutch looked around the car thoughtfully and nodded.

"Yeah. No room for babes."

"Or friends," Johnny said.

They looked at other cars after that, veering away from the fancy luxury cars much to the salesperson's disappointment.

Dutch stepping into their shop with that officially stamped note from his parents and a blank check had made the salesperson glow with excitement and after Dutch changed his mind they were trudging after the boys like they were bored.

They looked at all sorts of cars, Dutch getting into ones he liked, settling into the driver's seat with a frown, then he'd turn around and count the seats. Like he was looking for a space for where Bobby would sit, where Tommy would go, and Jimmy.

Most cars would fit the five of them, even if it'd be a tight squeeze in the backseat.

He looked at SUV's, sat down in one, and then turned to Johnny with a frown. "This feels like a soccer mom. I'm not a soccer mom."

"We'll find something. There are other places we can go and look," Johnny said.

"I forgot there were!" Dutch said eyes wide. "Shit, my parents recommended this place, but if I'm not getting something fancy, we could go somewhere else."

"Anywhere in mind?" Johnny asked following Dutch who'd scrambled out of the soccer mom car.

"Thanks but no thanks," Dutch said to the salesperson before grabbing his helmet for his bike and hurrying off with Johnny following.

They ended up visiting five different dealerships before Dutch laid eyes on that van. It was practically a minibus and as soon as Dutch had seen it he'd turned to Johnny with a grin, a real smile.

"It's almost like I'll be Fred, from Scooby-Doo. My own van. My own Mystery Machine. Look! It's got enough seats for everyone plus more friends, or girls."

"Or both," Johnny said.

It was Dutch's version of a big table.

He didn't cook. Or at least he hadn't.

He didn't host.

His parents didn't like people coming to the house. The guys almost never went and Johnny had been an exception but hadn't realized he was an exception until he'd already gotten used to it.

But Dutch could drive.

He could pile all their friends into one car, even if they bickered over long car rides.

He could help people move.

He could make sure people got home.

He could make sure no one felt lonely or missed out on the fun or left behind.

He'd bought it with the hopes of filling it full of friends he loved and cared about. And he got to subject everyone to his music.

Johnny thought he'd been counting the seats not just for them, not just to make sure there was enough room for Bobby, Jimmy, Tommy, and himself. But also, in case his parents wanted to come along too.

He could fit everyone he cared about into one place.

"Well if his parents are letting us fly out on their plane then of course, not a problem. It'll be fun," Daniel said.

"Do we want our trip to Ohio to also be a group trip?" Johnny asked.

"A road trip with all the guys?" Daniel asked thoughtfully.

Johnny shifted to grab the shampoo and to flick on the hand-held shower head and waited until it got warm before wetting Daniel's hair.

"What are you-"

"You just want to sit in here and not bathe?" Johnny asked amused.

"I'm going to wash your hair. Or you worried about catching a cold in this...freezing 80-degree weather we've got?"

"Fine," Daniel said tilting his head back.

Johnny made sure all of Daniel's hair was wet before turning off the showerhead and leaned it carefully back on its perch before moving onto shampoo, working it into Daniel's hair.

"I like the idea of traveling with the guys. But I also want to do a road trip just us," Daniel said, brown eyes looking up at him.

"Okay. We'll do both then," Johnny said.

"But we get our own room wherever we stay," Daniel said. "If we're going to be stuck together all day in the same car, I want our own room. They can share a bed with us some other time. I do not want to cram five to six of us in a tiny motel room every night."

"Fair," Johnny said leaning over and kissing Daniel's forehead before going back to washing his hair.

"I want to go back to Jersey again sometime."

"As long as I don't have to get in a car Louie Jr. drives ever again, I'm fine with that."

"I want to go for a winter holiday sometime. I know not this year, but maybe next year? Maybe...maybe after the new year? Nonnio's birthday is then and everyone goes to celebrate it. It's this huge thing. I didn't go this year because, well, I was a bit busy kicking you in the face and dealing with the fallout. But it'd be a good time to see everyone again and you could wear the sweater Nonnia made you."

Johnny paused in his work. He'd been trying to be as soothing as possible, and that seemed to unleash something curious.

"Is there something special about that sweater?"

Daniel started to pull away, Johnny caught the flush on his cheeks.

Oh hell, it did have more meaning to it.

He was not getting away.

Johnny was not walking into Jersey full of LaRusso's and the rest of the giant family Daniel hailed from wearing a sweater that meant

something and not know what it meant.

It probably wasn't something *bad* based on the blush on Daniel's cheeks and the way he was starting and stopping his explanation.

"I-well-er-it-Nonnia doesn't make them for everyone. It means she likes you."

"You setting me up to get into a fight with your cousins?" Johnny asked.

"No! Of course not. Not *you*. But the jealousy will be a delight to watch."

Johnny grabbed the showerhead again rinsing off his hair, switching over to conditioner.

"As long as I'm not walking into something weird."

"No, of course not."

That sounded like a lie. Too squeaky. But hell he'd look good in that sweater.

Maybe it was to show off.

It could be fun.

Plus Nonnio and Nonnia were nice.

"Okay," Johnny said, moving on to soap while the conditioner soaked in, or whatever it was supposed to do.

In the morning someone would work on all the tense muscles on Daniel's back. All the knots from everything. A professional who knew what they were doing.

Johnny shifted back a bit, not that Daniel had left him much space, and kissed Daniel's back, running a finger along his spine.

He'd be good.

He wouldn't leave a mark for the massage therapist to find. He'd save that for later.

Plus it might distract, might hurt if a bruised love bite was pressed on while working out a knot.

Daniel shivered despite the warm water they were in and Johnny washed his back with soapy hands, focusing on the expanse of Daniel's back. Smaller than him but solid from all the work he'd been doing.

"I forgot to ask," Johnny whispered in Daniel's ear as he moved his hands to wash Daniel's sides and up his front, dragging his fingers up his stomach and ribs and chest. Slow and methodical, feeling almost as much as he cleansed. Teasing as he went. Slow.

"What?" Daniel asked arching into his hands.

"What do you want for your birthday?" Johnny asked hand going back down and resting on Daniel's thigh. "I got you things but I didn't actually ever ask."

Daniel turned, eyes darker and hooking an arm around Johnny's neck pulling him into a kiss, as he turned.

Johnny's hand slid between Daniel's leg. Daniel moaned into the kiss, rolling his hips, before seemingly changing his mind and pulling away struggling to take slow deep breaths.

"No?" Johnny asked.

"Yes, and No," Daniel managed. "I do want to have sex with you in a tub, but also in a nice bed. It's going to be a while before we have a bed to ourselves in a private location with thicker walls, and like we did at your house but we-it's different right?"

Johnny smiled softly grabbing the showerhead again. "Okay, let me get the conditioner out of your hair," he said flicking it on and motioning for Daniel to turn back.

Daniel took the soap and continued washing all the spots Johnny hadn't gotten to yet.

"The answer to your question," Daniel said softly when he finished leaning his arms on Johnny's knees, tilting his head back, brown eyes meeting Johnny's. "Is always going to be you."

"Even when we're 50?" Johnny asked amused, running another pass through Daniel's hair, making sure he got it all.

"Especially when we're 50," Daniel said.

"You're going to get sick of getting the same thing every year," Johnny

said rinsing Daniel off.

Daniel turned, getting up and moving carefully to face Johnny, finding space for his legs, taking the showerhead, and leaning up and close to wet Johnny's hair.

"I like traditions," Daniel said, fingers slipping through Johnny's hair and his eyes slid shut, wrapping his arms loosely around Daniel's waist.

"Hmm."

"I mean we shouldn't do this every year," Daniel said.

"The bath or the hotel?"

"The hotel."

"It's not *that* expensive," Johnny said.

Daniel laughed. "That is a lie."

"I've spent my whole life without a lot of money, or with money with a warning tag on it that every time I touched it, it felt like it was venomous or cursed. We couldn't afford to do anything before and then everything else, any request to do anything felt like having to purposefully step on broken glass so I had to decide whether it was worth it or not to walk over it. It usually wasn't. But this, doing things because I want to, because it makes you happy which makes me happy, because it's nice to get away and have a nice meal with my boyfriend and stay somewhere where we don't have to worry about other people, because I get to spend time with the man I love," Johnny looked up at Daniel whose hands had stilled in his hair. "It's worth every cent."

Daniel leaned down and kissed him, gently cupping his face, and Johnny pulled him close, flush against him.

"You always spend too much money on me," Daniel breathed when he pulled away. "My knee-"

"My fault."

"Okinawa."

"I wanted to go too."

"I know you're putting more money down for the apartment,"

"It's where we're going to live. I want it to be somewhere that will last. Where you live should be a place to relax and recuperate. It shouldn't stress you out."

"Stubborn," Daniel huffed, hands sliding down to Johnny's shoulders.

"You know I'm right," Johnny said with a smile.

"I do. But I don't want to feel like I'm not contributing. I want this to be equal."

Johnny blinked at him in surprise. "Do you not realize all the stuff you do?"

Daniel rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I make dinner sometimes."

"You do all the bookkeeping for the shop. You do payroll. You handle all the phone calls. You handle the fax machine we got. You talk to the customers. You-"

"That's work stuff," Daniel said shifting back up to finish washing Johnny's hair and then grabbing the soap.

"You-"

How could Johnny explain how much Daniel had helped him? If Daniel hadn't shown up in California he'd still be studying at Cobra Kai.

If they hadn't gotten closer he would've continued to blame himself for losing, would've believed every word Kreese had said. Without Daniel, his mother would probably still be married to Sid. Johnny probably would've slowly become an alcoholic to cope. He'd become a permanent fixture at Jimmy's cousin's bar. He'd probably have gotten arrested already. Celebrated turning 18 but being in jail.

He'd have pulled away from everyone he knew and loved, slowly, over time until he was all alone.

He had everything he had because Daniel kept grabbing his hand and wouldn't let him slip away, wouldn't let him slide down into the murky depths.

It might've taken time, years, decades to sink to the bottom, but he wouldn't have held on.

He'd have given up, become a shell, like a cicada skin. The creature who did all the screaming, who made all the sound long gone, and the shell just barely hanging on, a clear husk left behind like the ghost of a memory of a person. Just the bits left.

Maybe the whole thing felt uneven, looked uneven from the outside.

Johnny paying for expensive bills, for treats like fancy hotels, for 19 bouquets. Maybe it looked excessive like Daniel was letting Johnny pay for everything and sliding into an unequal debt. But Johnny was grateful that his heart no longer felt cold, felt warm and beat so strongly in his chest and there was no price tag for that.

Having Daniel by his side, holding his hand from long before they started dating, carefully helping him back onto the path like it was easy, loving him when he'd felt so worthless, wanting him when he didn't think anyone would.

That kindness had changed Johnny's whole world.

Chapter End Notes

80 degrees Fahrenheit is 26.6 Celsius

Mac and Cheese

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The look Johnny gave Daniel when he asked what he contributed to beyond work and cooking nearly made his heart skip a beat.

The things he'd said about not having money, how stuff like this made him happy too, maybe that was the point. Like how his mom used all the "for a special occasion" stuff every day after they found out his dad was going to die. Because every day they were together *was* a special occasion.

Maybe that was how Johnny felt.

Something similar.

That everything was special specifically because they were together and if he had the money it might as well be used.

He gingerly rinsed out Johnny's hair thoughtfully while Johnny looked for words.

He was going to try and make an effort to stop, to be even more in the moment. Because Johnny was right there and was up to do anything. And as much as he wanted to have sex in a big bathtub he was pretty sure the water would get cold before it was over and it wouldn't be pleasant. The last time had been on the ground.

Johnny hadn't complained but it had bothered his knee a little, he could only imagine what the bathtub would do.

He wasn't 19 yet but already was starting to feel old. Maybe not old exactly but more sensitive with the upcoming tournament that he needed to be in peak health and perform at his best. Which meant he was being careful of his knee. It didn't really bother him anymore but he was worried about it. Worried it was a weakness that'd be exploited. That even though it felt fine it wasn't.

He was worried that it'd suddenly lead to his downfall. That he was being held up by strings that were fraying and if he didn't do his best to keep his knee in the best care he could, he'd collapse at the tournament and be broken apart.

He'd liked Johnny's hands on him, and he was going to do the same thing, but he was going to look.

He hadn't looked in Okinawa. He'd behaved. He **wouldn't** this time. He was going to touch and he was going to enjoy it, indulge. He shifted to make sure he was more comfortable, not on his knees, sitting across Johnny, letting their legs get tangled up. It'd been nice to sit with his back to Johnny to lean against him, but it was better to look at him and be able to touch more than just his knees or the arms leaning against the edges of the tub.

Johnny moved Daniel's hand from one of his pecs to over his heart, covering his hand in his own.

"Without you and everything you and Mr. Miyagi did for me, I'd be on a different path. I-I'd have pulled away from everyone, slowly over time because of Kreese and Sid. I would've believed everything. But your kind chatty nature, this hand that never let go of mine, always looked for me...I feel better. I know it's a process. I've been told it's a process. But you helped me start it. Every time you grabbed me and pulled me in, kept me at your side, you kept everything from turning to grey."

Daniel knew he was bright red, turning away from the blue eyes on him, but Johnny leaned forward, closer to him.

"I needed help and you helped me even though you didn't have to. Even though you had every reason to turn away and never interact with me again. Every small kindness felt like more than I deserved but I so desperately needed it and just didn't realize it. Just by being you, you make my world a better place. I love you," Johnny said cupping the side of Daniel's face, pulling him back in so he could look Daniel in the eyes, running his thumb over his bottom lip.

"Not just because of that. You're smart and resourceful and you stand your ground for what you believe in but know when things are too much when things go too far. You're a good person. There's so much I love and I'll figure out how to tell you all of them over time. It won't *always* be flowers. I'll try not to bury you in them. But there's a lot you do that I don't think you realize you do that just makes my life better and I wouldn't change a thing. I'll make you a list sometime."

The water had already started to cool and it was going to get cold and they were going to be miserable. But-

Daniel parted his lips and licked Johnny's thumb, a quick flick, taste of

his skin. Johnny's thumb pulled away to be replaced by Johnny's lips. If he was lucky maybe he'd enjoy those lips elsewhere. If he hurried. He didn't want to hurry. But he also wanted to hurry. Johnny's hair was done, check. Pecs...maybe another-

Johnny took the soap from him and pulled back, out of their kiss.

"How about I finish up here and then meet you in the bedroom?"

Johnny's voice, his eyes, were carefully restrained, those cracks that Daniel never bothered to hide. Lust. Want.

Daniel smiled kissing Johnny, a quick peck then stood up, the water streaming off of him, leaving Johnny in the bath. Feeling blue eyes on him.

He wouldn't leave completely. Not yet. He stepped out carefully onto the thick towel and grabbed another to wrap around himself, drying off and taking one of the robes off the back of the door.

It was softer than he'd thought at first glance.

There were toothbrushes individually packaged. Johnny probably packed one for him, somewhere but Daniel didn't want to leave. He wanted to be there, a reminder to hurry, to not leave Daniel waiting too long.

He brushed his teeth at the sink watching Johnny out of the corner of his eye. There wasn't a shower curtain in the bathroom. It was freestanding in the middle of the room, large and it looked comfortable for Johnny. Big and deep enough for him. Daniel could see him sitting in there with a good book.

They'd have to make sure there was a nice bath with enough space. So Johnny could sit in there with a book, and Daniel could join him.

The question now was, did he want to do the same thing as they'd done camping or something different? He replayed that night in his head more often than he'd ever admit to anyone. The problem was while there were other positions, he still wanted to see Johnny's face, still wanted to be in charge, today, tonight, this time.

It felt like a missed opportunity to try something new. To work on that list. But he'd liked it, like a recipe he'd found and tried and wanted to make again. Especially since they didn't get to do it that way often. It was usually something quicker, quieter.

He couldn't dally any longer. If he did he'd just be leaning against the counter watching Johnny finish his bath and that did feel a little weird. So he stuck his feet in the slippers and walked out to look for the bedroom.

He pushed the door open that he hadn't looked in before. There was a big bed and a dresser, a couple of bedside tables and a phone, some lamps.

He closed the curtains, turned on a lamp, and flicked off the overhead light before flopping down on the bed face first, arms spread wide. It was almost as nice as Johnny's bed at his mother's house. He rolled over then sat up. He hadn't packed. Had Johnny brought condoms or lube? He looked through the drawers, opening everything he could find. He found a black box in the corner, unassuming, and opened it. Condoms. He sat down holding one. That wouldn't be enough. He frowned and chewed on his bottom lip.

Oil might work but he didn't have any of that. And he'd rather be careful. He'd have to ask Johnny if he packed any. *Though!* He could look in his own bag. Daniel went to the other room and grabbed his backpack and brought it into the bedroom. He carefully pulled out his clothes setting them aside. They were all nice clothes. Comfortable but stuff Daniel would wear to meet Ms. Lawrence. His toothbrush was packed, his brush, his toiletry bag but not what he was looking for.

Maybe he could get dressed and buy some? Somewhere?

What was taking Johnny so long? He'd scare him if he went back in there.

Daniel flopped back down on the bed. He could pull back the covers.

He got up, pushed back the covers, and sat down, looking at the art on the walls. He pulled the blankets around himself, the robe was a bit much. He took it off and set it on the floor.

Johnny came in setting his own bag on the edge of the room next to Daniel's and leaned down, hands on either side of Daniel's hips kissing him warmly.

He tasted minty on Daniel's tongue.

Johnny's fingers went to the tie of the robe around his waist, slipping it off his shoulders and letting it fall onto the floor, adding his own to the pile. There was something he'd been looking for and couldn't find.

Something he thought he should do, something other than touching Johnny's chest, his torso, his sides, his hips, that expanse of skin, soft from the bath oils beneath his fingertips.

Want. He wanted everything. He shifted gently pushing himself up, pushing Johnny down, rolling them, watching as Johnny's head landed on the pillow, blonde hair haloing.

He had permission to touch everywhere. To feel Johnny. He knew where Johnny liked to be touched. Where to kiss him to get his breath unsteady. There was still plenty to learn and like a scientist using the scientific method Daniel was more than happy to run every test over and over again to see the results and feel pleasure at the payoff.

He slid his hand between Johnny's legs, wanting to hear him again when Johnny's hand stopped him. His face was flushed. He twisted and grabbed something he'd set down on the bedside table that Daniel hadn't paid attention to.

He'd forgotten about the- condom? Daniel *had* a condom. Now Daniel had two. He laughed softly, picking up the other he'd found. Johnny looked a little confused. Daniel studied them both. He'd use the one Johnny gave him. Keep the other in case. He set it aside on the bedside table. Maybe he'd put it back later. There'd been a lot of them. It had to be a thing. He got ready then remembered the lack of lube and sat back with a frown.

Johnny pushed himself up.

"What is it? What do you want to do?"

"Sex," Daniel said simply. "But we need lube."

Johnny laid back down. "It's okay."

"It's not okay," Daniel said leaning over Johnny, preparing to share all the warnings his godfathers had given him, all the safety, the ways to avoid hurting a partner or oneself, the dangers of not taking it seriously. But Johnny *knew* that. It was on the list of things Bobby and Dutch had told him. A warning about half measures. And Daniel knew Johnny had had sex with Ali, was sure from the way they'd talked at the party that it'd always been as safe as possible. He wouldn't just ignore something fundamental.

He slid his hand back down between Johnny's legs.

Oh.

"That's why you were in the bath longer," Daniel said softly.

He sat back again curious, heart pounding. Johnny had prepared already. Had brought lube in his bag, had already-was ready for him, waiting. He wondered if Johnny would've done that if he'd stayed if he could've watched, if, did he find it when he'd prepared? He hadn't heard him. He was pretty sure he would've heard if he had.

Johnny gasped as Daniel's fingers moved, he was so pink. Blushing while Daniel sat between his legs curious and fascinated, so stunned he couldn't move. Couldn't follow through with the next steps. All the words all the thoughts had short-circuited. He just watched Johnny in the soft light of the hotel room, the way his lips parted, the easy way everything worked. How easy it was to find it because he knew where it was. To watch in better lighting how Johnny reacted to it.

"*Daniel,"* Johnny had pushed himself up, gently pushing on Daniel's hand away, he was breathing hard, those abs easy to see from how tense he was, struggling to focus, needing to say something, almost so far gone.

Daniel leaned forward to hear him.

"Are you going to-"

Right. He'd gotten lost. Distracted. He wondered, if he could move Johnny, lifting one of those long legs over his shoulder, testing it, it might work. It might be a deeper stretch if he leaned down to kiss him, But he didn't seem bothered. Maybe he was more flexible than Daniel had realized.

All that training.

He sunk down into him, kissing him listening to him with every move.

In the morning Daniel woke up to the sunlight streaming in through the curtains.

Johnny was still sleeping.

Maybe it wore him out. More than anything else they did.

More than hiking or rock climbing or karate.

He kissed Johnny's temple.

Nineteen.

He held Johnny close, feeling the soft rise and fall of his breath, his steady heartbeat.

Daniel had never celebrated his birthday without family. Without his mother. Even though he'd had cake with Mr. Miyagi, even though he'd gone to chase after Ali, he'd still had breakfast with his mother, had still sat with her on the couch to talk about the day when he got home, to blow out more candles and make a wish with her singing to him.

She was in Jersey though. And this year instead he had Johnny and a day at a spa.

He'd probably have cake with Mr. Miyagi and Johnny and it'd be a quiet birthday.

A quiet nineteen.

His final year of being a teen.

After a while Johnny began to stir, slowly rolling over, he rubbed sleepily at one of his eyes and yawned. Daniel would never get over how he looked in the morning light, after letting Daniel have him. Messy hair and covered in love bites, but so relaxed and languid, unhurried. He was unhurried on normal mornings, but it became more so on mornings after. Like all he wanted to do after was cuddle and in the mornings to continue that cuddling.

Endorphines. Euphoric.

"Want breakfast?" Johnny asked, voice heavy with sleep.

"You don't look like you're going anywhere soon," Daniel said amused.

Johnny's eyes had met his for a moment before shutting again. He looked tired but so relaxed.

"Mmm jus' a moment," he yawned.

Johnny took in a deep breath and stretched, a full-body stretch before

curling back in towards Daniel. "Room service?"

Daniel nearly protested. He didn't want to think of how much that'd cost. But he also felt like Johnny. He didn't want to get up and move. He didn't want to put on real clothes until he had to, until his appointment.

"Is there a menu?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"Drawer," Johnny said.

Daniel rolled over amused when Johnny's arm wrapped around him like he was worried Daniel was going to leave, or like he didn't want him to leave the bed yet. Maybe he was worried Daniel would fall out of bed, but that'd only happened almost once and it was because the hotel room beds in New York had been too small for the two of them.

He rummaged around the drawer finding the binder about the hotel and rolling back over flipping through it in search of room service.

"What do you want?"

" 'merican breakfast."

Daniel glanced at the menu, scanning it, shifting onto his back, Johnny curling up over his chest.

It included pancakes, eggs, sausage or bacon, and juice.

"How do you want your eggs?"

"mmm."

He was falling asleep again.

Daniel looked over the menu again. He could just get different things and then when Johnny actually got up he could pick or share. There was a phone barely within arms reach and he leaned over as carefully as he could to not disturb the sleeping blonde and put in their order. It'd take a half-hour. He glanced at the clock. He could spend twenty minutes like this.

Twenty minutes of Johnny fast asleep again.

Daniel knew he'd been sleepy when they went camping. Had slept in. But he usually didn't unless he was sick. He gently pressed the back of his hand to Johnny's forehead. He seemed fine. He pulled the blanket up and around them.

They had plenty of time. He could eat, shower, and be ready for the spa.

Was Johnny coming or was he going to continue sleeping?

He ran his fingers along Johnny's spine, over his back. There was still tension there. But it wasn't nearly as bad as it had been the first time he'd touched Johnny's back. It looked like their roles reversed.

Daniel was now the tense one in need of a massage.

He wondered how long they had the room for. While he was at the spa would Johnny check them out and wait for him? Or would he find Johnny still curled up in bed?

He puzzled over his day, not letting himself look too far into the future, turning around and trudging back to the present every time he found himself heading towards that ominous tournament date and the prep he needed to do for it.

He pulled himself gently out of Johnny's arms when there were ten minutes left and put on one of the discarded robes, made sure he wasn't too scandalous looking, and shut the door to the bedroom to go out and wait in the living room for their food. He thanked the person who brought it up and pushed it the rest of the way in the bedroom where Johnny was finally sitting up, blinking around blearily.

They sat on the bed eating, Johnny stealing some of Daniel's bacon, but passing over sausage as a trade, drinking coffee before leaning over to kiss Daniel.

"Happy birthday Daniel," Johnny said when he pulled away.

Daniel smiled.

After breakfast, Daniel showered while Johnny cleaned up their breakfast, returned it to the cart, and put it outside their room.

He wasn't joining Daniel for the spa day. Which made Daniel wonder just how expensive everything had been. How much had he spent on Daniel?

There was no getting any of it back and Johnny wouldn't want him to, so he was determined to enjoy it. To enjoy his massage and seaweed wrap or whatever they were going to do.

Daniel didn't like being alone. He liked having someone to talk to.

But there was something peaceful about walking into the spa and going through the motions to put on a new robe, to laying down and thinking of absolutely nothing while someone worked out the knots in his back like he was made out of bread dough.

The warmth of hot stones, the sounds of their zen tapes, all the goop they put on his skin, the work they did on his face, his nails until he felt like a new person almost.

Wrapped up in a robe sitting on a chair waiting for some fancy water letting the mask part of the facial set.

He understood why people like Ms. Lawrence had once-a-month appointments. The closest his mom got was getting her nail and hair done. One day he'd have to pay for something like this for her.

"How was it?" Johnny asked when he got back. The room was almost all packed up, but he was still in a robe, unchanged, not dressed.

"Very nice," Daniel said laying down on the couch with a satisfied sigh. "When do we have to leave?"

"I moved back our check out. As long as we're heading home by 5 we're good."

"Really?" Daniel asked turning to look at the TV.

He could spend his birthday doing absolutely nothing and that sounded delightful.

"Yup," Johnny said sitting down next to him. "What do you want to do?"

"Watch TV?"

Johnny smiled flicking it on and sitting down next to him.

Daniel curled up next to him, head in his lap.

They ordered lunch and it felt like such a wonderfully lazy day, to just sit around with Johnny doing nothing. Just breathing, just being.

"We've got a couple of hours before we have to leave," Johnny said softly. "Anything else you want to do?"

Daniel didn't want to move. But there was plenty he wanted to do. He rolled onto his back looking up at Johnny.

Johnny laughed softly leaning down to kiss him, letting himself be pulled down into a deeper kiss, the show on the TV forgotten and Daniel focused on tasting Johnny and the feel of his tongue against his own, on getting rid of that robe and spending his afternoon enjoying time alone with his boyfriend.

After a shower Johnny got ready, finished packing and cleaning up the last of their stuff, the last two bouquets ready for them to carry down to the Avanti. The other seventeen waiting in the backseat.

He returned to kiss Daniel gently on the forehead.

"Ready to go home?" he asked scooping up one of the vases and holding out his hand.

"No," Daniel whispered.

He wanted to stay in that hotel forever. Just keep having sex with Johnny and getting room service and watching TV. He didn't want to return to the real world. He didn't want to leave. He got why Johnny had booked a hotel. Why he'd booked such a nice one. They had no responsibilities there. Didn't have to clean, though they didn't leave a mess. They didn't have to worry about cooking or anyone hearing them, or anything at all. Plus the food they bought was good.

He got up with a sigh taking the held-out hand and the other bouquet. He followed Johnny to check out and back to the Avanti breathing in December in LA. Smog. Listening to the radio with Johnny as they made their way back up north towards Reseda and to Mr. Miyagi's home.

He was looking forward to seeing Mr. Miyagi. But he'd also enjoyed the middle-of-the-week vacation they'd had. They'd done absolutely nothing and it'd been wonderful.

Johnny parked and Daniel took his bag walking with him back up to the house.

It smelled like mac and cheese. Tears pricked at his eyes. That homesick feeling washing over him.

Johnny gently nudged him forward, to keep him moving and not just stuck in the doorway.

"We're home Mr. Miyagi!" Daniel called, swallowing down that watery prickly feeling.

He'd told Mr. Miyagi he liked mac and cheese. Told everyone. And the thought of Mr. Miyagi making him mac and cheese was heartwarming, but it also made him miss his mom.

Johnny carefully pulled the bag out of his hands and set it on the floor with his own, putting his hands on Daniel's shoulders and walking him towards the kitchen, guiding him, coaxing him carefully until he caught sight of the curly brown hair of the woman standing at the kitchen over the stove. Heard her talking to Mr. Miyagi a mile a minute in her thick New Jersey accent.

He ran, darting around the table and carefully around Mr. Miyagi, throwing his arms around her.

"Ma!"

She smiled, turning to him, hugging him back tightly.

"Hi honey! Happy Birthday! Did you have fun on your birthday so far?"

He nodded into her arms, eyes filling up with tears as he breathed in her perfume, holding on tightly hoping it wasn't a dream, hoping it was real and she was as solid and there as she felt.

"I missed you too," she said softly kissing the top of his head.

Chapter End Notes

> 100 chapters...I was not expecting this to be so long when I started it and it's still going. Wow. Thanks for sticking along this journey with me so far.
>
> I didn't know a good way to fit this in because I don't think either of them is fully aware of it. But ever since Silver snuck into Mr. Miyagi's Johnny checks all the security measures they implemented, checks the fireplace even though there's a grate

every night before bed, and sleeps lightly because he's concerned there will be a break-in again. Essentially he's also been very stressed about everything and concerned for Mr. Miyagi and Daniel's safety. So when they went camping he slept in a little because the only real concern were bears. The hotel, on the other hand, no one except Laura and Mr. Miyagi know exactly where they are and he picked a secure hotel and locked the door so Johnny went back to sleep because he feels 100% safe. Thus it went like Breakfast? Oh Daniels' got that, back to sleep. (Though Daniel is still partially right, they both left less stressed).

Photographs from Before and Now

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny nodded to Mrs. LaRusso and picked up their bags to unpack. It'd be quick. Most of it just went back in the bathroom or into their dirty laundry hamper. Or the flowers that were filling the backseat of the Avanti that needed to be brought in. Which was maybe too much once he saw them all together. So he carefully carried them into their room, one by one frowning at the lack of space. When they were all crowded together in their room it was more obvious that he'd overdone it.

He'd liked the idea of getting him a bouquet for every year. And then he realized he didn't know which flowers Daniel actually liked. Maybe he'd do a bouquet with the number of flowers from now on. Twenty bouquets in a small apartment next year would for sure overdo it while twenty individual flowers in a bouquet was a paragraph, a speech, not a whole book.

He set the last one down then turned to return to the kitchen where Mrs. LaRusso was speaking soft to Daniel, still hugging him tightly. Mr. Miyagi was sitting at the table drinking tea and he smiled warmly at Johnny, pouring him a cup of tea when he got close.

"How'd you get here?" Daniel asked pulling away.

"I flew. Laura paid for my ticket and picked me up. I'm staying with her for a couple of days while I take stuff out of Jimmy's house and move it to my new apartment."

"You're staying?" Daniel asked, stunned and happy, hope filling his voice.

"You would not believe the flood of job offers I got all of a sudden," Mrs. LaRusso said shooting a warm knowing smile to Johnny. "Someone has been talking me up to every high-level position in the valley. Your uncle Louie got sick of the phone ringing off the hook."

Daniel turned to look at Johnny who lowered his gaze innocently picking up his tea.

He'd wanted to pay for the flight, to send the guys to pick her up, had

thought about having her arrive early and pick her up himself, but his mother had jumped on it. Pounced as soon as he mentioned that he wanted Mrs. LaRusso in town for Daniel's birthday.

He was pretty sure his mom booked her first class and had them give her a bottle of wine as soon as she got settled on board. She'd listed off all the fun things about her picking Mrs. LaRusso up. They could catch up, talk, she'd have someone to go out with, they could get a manicure, they could go back to their lunch dates, and she'd finally have someone to drink wine with. Girl's night for like a week.

He also knew his mother missed their dinner parties and was excited to not be in that new house all by herself. He was trying to talk her into adopting a pet from the sanctuary. Maybe a kitten or puppy. Heck, even a turtle if she wanted it. Though for some reason he could see his mother with chickens.

He hadn't been the only one working on finding a way for Mrs. LaRusso to stay permanently. He'd asked the guys to look.

They'd agreed on a few things.

It had to be a steady job that she'd like, that paid well.

It had to have benefits.

It had to be interesting. It couldn't be boring.

It had to be *worth* moving back. Away from her family.

Something so that she'd stay.

A job that wouldn't keep sending her away.

The Browns had bought the blueberry pie recipe from her, had offered her a job and an apartment above one of their bakeries.

He knew Dutch had found a couple of computer and tech jobs like the one she'd gotten when she'd moved into town the first time.

Jimmy had found a couple of jobs in his family business and with their contacts.

Tommy's aunt had found some spaces in the local magazines and at his Uncle's hospital.

He knew his mom had also been looking. Forwarding Mrs. LaRusso's

information to pretty much every nice place she knew.

Johnny didn't have a clue which one she'd accepted.

All that mattered was she was here. That that void she'd left in Daniel's life was refilled. That she couldn't be pulled away suddenly like that again.

He'd made sure to cover his bases.

He talked with Tommy's uncle about Louie Sr.'s condition, what was needed to take care of him. Turned out it was something included in his health care, just no one had filled out the paperwork, hadn't been aware of it. No one had even told Louie Sr. or his family that it was an option.

He'd had an awkward conversation with Louie Jr. over it, helping him walk through the paperwork so that they could get the help they needed and free Mrs. LaRusso from her familial duties so she could come back home without feeling guilty.

He'd been prepared to anonymously pay for one. But this had been better.

The paperwork had just been a pain in the ass. And he had to keep faxing things to Louie Jr. to make sure it was done correctly.

Essentially a go-between between Tommy's uncle and Louie's family. He'd done it in the morning while Daniel was out running with Dutch.

He'd get up when Daniel did and then when Daniel went to meet Dutch or Dutch came to pick him up he'd drive to the shop to use the phone and the fax machine. It had been so frustrating. Had taken a couple of months of making sure the correct forms were filled out. Going through bureaucratic nonsense that Johnny knew if he threw a wad of cash at it'd go away. But if he did that he had a feeling Louie Jr. would get pissy at him. It was the worst part of his day. Partially because it was hard to get Louie Jr. to focus, to not start talking, to stop puffing up his chest over the phone line about how much better Jersey was to California and what did a fancy pants beach boy know about hospital paperwork? Was the fancy pants beach boy going to school to become a doctor? He thought all Johnny did was tan on the beach, probably didn't know how to work at all. How was the shop going? Was he actually helping or just leeching off of Daniel's good idea? If Louie Jr. came up there it'd be an overnight success, and

maybe he would. Maybe he'd show Johnny the LaRusso way.

Johnny always tightened the cord into his fist and then worked his way through his deep breathing exercises, pacing as much as the cord would allow. The kid's dad was sick. He was taking his frustration out on Johnny even though Johnny was helping him and more importantly he was trying to help Mrs. LaRusso and Daniel.

He did a lot of deep breathing exercises. He always had a cut off for how long he was on the phone with Louie Jr. And once that cut off time hit, he gave Louie Jr. something to do, some document to read over, some paperwork to look at, told him he'd talk to him tomorrow ignoring the snide comment he always got in response, hung up and would go for a run or to the gym. Something to get rid of the itchy annoyance that flooded his skin so that he could meet Daniel and Dutch and feel a little more grounded, a little less frustrated.

He was grateful to Tommy's uncle who would when they met up solemnly make him a cup of coffee and agree that the whole process was utter nonsense. Especially over the phone, for people, he didn't know too well. Then they'd sit and go over the next steps, and check over the paperwork to make sure it wouldn't get rejected. Because that had happened, and Johnny had had to start back over from the beginning.

He had rolled his plan around in his head a lot. He knew how much Daniel missed his dad. How much he just lived with that pain. And that he missed his mom. That Mrs. LaRusso's sudden disappearance from LA, the loss of her and the apartment had cracked something in Daniel.

Johnny knew what it was like to lose your home, but even though he'd been blocked from his mother, had watched her fly out and go on trips, he'd never lost her. She'd never been dragged away to the other end of the country and trapped in the muck of family illness. The never-ending sinking quicksand. But he knew that every time she'd left for long stints of time he'd missed her. He could only imagine how Daniel felt. The way that pain was an additional weight he carried.

It was part of everything though. Part of his bigger plan. But this one was older. Original. Ever since he'd seen Daniel's face fall when the woman at Seven Seas told him his mother had already left. The disbelief, the pain, the shock in that moment. The feeling of being abandoned, left behind.

She filled bowls full of mac and cheese and they sat around the kitchen table. She caught Daniel up on everything. On Uncle Louie, his grandparents, Louie Jr, New Jersey.

Daniel reached out to Johnny and held his hand under the table, talking almost as much as Mrs. LaRusso. Telling her about the shop, excited about the bonsai, telling her everything she'd missed.

Except for the big thing.

The tournament and the pain and the suffering.

He skipped the return of Cobra Kai and the new enemies who'd appeared who had nothing better to do but harass Daniel.

After dinner, Mr. Miyagi brought out a cake full of candles and Daniel looked so happy. So relaxed. So cheerful.

It was almost like before Okinawa. Almost like before Silver had sunk a claw into him.

It was a simple chocolate cake but delicious and they sat around talking until it was late.

"Where are you staying?" Daniel asked.

"With Laura at least for a bit. Her new place is wonderful."

"It is," Daniel agreed.

"Do you want to go stay with them?" Johnny whispered softly.

Daniel turned to him. Thinking about it seriously.

Johnny could repack their bags. They could go stay with his mom. He knew she wouldn't mind. Or if-

"Not tonight," Daniel said softly to Johnny before turning back to Mrs. LaRusso. "How are you getting back there?"

"That's how," Mrs. LaRusso said motioning towards the door and the knock that sounded.

Johnny stood opening it to find his mother holding a gift. She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

"Have fun on your romantic getaway?" she asked quietly a teasing,

knowing smile on her lips.

Johnny flushed red.

She smiled squeezing his arm before walking past.

"Daniel! How does nineteen feel?" she asked.

"Normally I'd say the exact same as every year before, but today feels so much better Ms. Lawrence," Daniel said warmly.

"I'm so glad," she said passing the box over to Daniel and taking a seat, warmly greeting Mr. Miyagi.

Johnny sat down back in his spot and Daniel opened up the box, pulling out a blue silk tie and fancy cuff links that sparkled in the light of the kitchen. "Wow Ms. Lawrence, this is-"

"It's part of a set," Laura said. "Your mom and I were talking about suits and I like your Dad's powder blue suit, but you should have one that fits you now, so sometime, when you're up for a day of shopping, your Mom and I are going to buy you a nice custom suit. We'll go out for brunch or lunch or coffee and go shopping. But you'll get to pick something that feels like you."

"And shoes," Mrs. LaRusso said smiling warmly.

"That will be nice, thank you both," Daniel said looking between the two of them.

Johnny was pretty sure his mom had been in the same boat as him. Had probably tried to buy Daniel something too expensive and had to reign it in.

Johnny had failed. But his mother had managed it.

They were probably lucky she hadn't just bought them a house across the street.

After sitting around and talking a little more, they promised to come by Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees in the morning then left left and Mr. Miyagi smiled.

"Happy birthday Daniel-san," Mr. Miyagi said passing his gift across to Daniel. "Boxes come too."

Daniel opened the box from Mr. Miyagi first and Johnny watched him

pull out a watch, a nice one, and quickly telling Mr. Miyagi how much he loved it and about how his last watch had broke at school and he hadn't bothered to get another one and Mr. Miyagi nodded, smiling warmly.

He then passed over three packages.

One from Okinawa that Daniel opened with a frown like he was worried someone had sent him a curse. On top was an envelope he opened, full of photos of Johnny and Daniel, from all the photoshoots, a couple of magazines, and clippings from advertisements.

He passed it to Mr. Miyagi to look at and pulled out something wrapped carefully in cloth.

"Hmm. Good photos," Mr. Miyagi said flicking through them. "Yukie say very popular." He laughed softly at some inside joke. "Say popular with girls and Chozen."

Daniel unwrapped the cloth and held a black belt. "It's from Sato and Chozen," Daniel said. "Chozen wrote this one should fit."

Johnny couldn't tell whether Daniel was touched or annoyed. Somewhere teetering between.

He pulled out a carefully wrapped box that he unwrapped. He held it, eyes wide. It was covered in Japanese but it was clearly a camera.

"Ah, Yukie sent Fotorama, like poloroid camera," Mr. Miyagi said.

Daniel set out box after box of little film cartridges.

Johnny leaned over to read the note.

Capture memories.

He passed it to Mr. Miyagi to read the instructions. Mr. Miyagi put on his glasses and popped the box open, reading the instructions and setting up the camera while Daniel continued to open his gifts. There were more snacks, different ones from what they'd sent for Johnny's birthday.

The next thing was from Kumiko, a black jacket. *This way at least one of you has a nice vintage leather jacket.*

Daniel laughed softly setting all of it aside and moving to the next box from Newark. He pulled out candy from Nonnio and jars of jam.

Cassette tapes from his cousins and a sweater. It almost matched Johnny's and Daniel was frozen staring at it as he pulled it out of the box and held it in front of him. It was green.

Clearly, there were more to these sweaters than Daniel had let on by the absolute shell-shocked look on his face.

There was a click and whir, a flash of light as Mr. Miyagi got the camera set up.

Daniel carefully folded up the sweater with all the snacks and treats from home and set it aside with the stuff from Okinawa before turning to the next box.

It was from Ohio, from Jessica. She sent a long handwritten letter that Daniel after a couple of lines he set aside and pulled out a box of chocolates with something pale brown in the center and little holes in them.

"What's that?" Johnny asked.

"She calls them buckeyes. Chocolate and peanut butter."

"Take pictures," Mr. Miyagi said waving between the two of them. "Take few, maybe send few to Yukie. Hmm?"

Daniel nodded leaning in close to Johnny and smiling brightly. Johnny leaned in close, arm around Daniel's waist. Mr. Miyagi took three. Then Johnny took the camera from him and Daniel moved over to sit close to Mr. Miyagi who beemed proudly, happy. Johnny followed Mr. Miyagi and took three. They sat and waited for them to develop. Mr. Miyagi took two of each. And Daniel took the final ones.

"Happy Birthday Daniel-san. Good night, sleep well," Mr. Miyagi said. Heading off with his photos.

Johnny cleaned up and then filled his arms with Daniel's gifts, to carry off all the non-food back to their room. The food and snacks going in the kitchen. Daniel got most of his gifts, which left Johnny with just the envelope of pictures and magazines from Okinawa and the instant photos.

"Where do you want these?" Johnny asked them up.

Daniel was hanging up the jacket in the closet.

"Just stick them in the desk drawer," Daniel said.

Johnny opened the drawer.

"Wait!" Daniel said and Johnny glanced at him, then in the drawer.

There were a lot of magazines in there. Well worn. He realized he'd never opened the desk drawer before.

Why did Daniel sound panicked?

They were just magazines.

Unless they were skin mags.

Johnny set the photos and stuff from Okinawa down on the desk and frowned.

Daniel was allowed to like what he liked, to look at what he liked, but the way he usually talked made it seem like Johnny was the hottest person Daniel had ever seen. And Johnny *liked* that. Preened a little that Daniel's liked him so unequivocally. But now he was curious but like a bad curiosity. The kind where the answer might bother him, the kind that would eat away at him if he didn't find out the answer.

Was it women? Men?

Were they all the same? Were they different?

Johnny never bought any because he didn't trust that it would go well. With his luck, it'd be found and he'd either get beaten for it or made fun of depending on Sid's mood, or both. And he would for sure have told his mother. His mother might not have cared, but it would've felt awful with Sid directing that ship. So he'd never-he'd seen them, but-

What was Daniel into? Something other than Johnny's Californian blonde hair, muscles, and blue eyes?

Daniel was moving towards him, babbling about how it was nothing, just old magazines and he was blushing. He was red. There was something in these magazines that Daniel jerked off to. He picked out one off the top. It was well worn. A favorite? Oh god, did he actually want to look?

Daniel wasn't stopping him, wasn't asking him not to look. He just seemed highly embarrassed.

Maybe he'd learn more about Daniel, what he liked. He set the magazine down on the desk, he'd find his answer easily, just like someone did with a book. A book of poetry with a favorite poem in it. How it would open to that poem immediately. Like he expected it opened to a specific page.

It was an article with photos...with...him?

This was tame though.

There wasn't anything hot-it wasn't a skin mag?

It was just Johnny?

Wait, this was the magazine he'd been in.

Daniel was talking again, Tommy had given it to him, then his aunt had given him the others. Others?

Johnny looked back in the drawer.

They were all the same publication.

He opened one of them, it fell open to pictures of him. The next one, the same thing. There was an envelope. He picked it up and pictures of Johnny fell out. All the modeling photoshoots.

If Tommy and his aunt had given Daniel an embarrassing amount of photos of Johnny, why was he so red? Like it was- Johnny looked back at the first magazine, of him on the beach, glistening.

Oh.

He felt his ears burn.

He had his answer. He really was Daniel's type.

He did not know what to do with this information, sitting down in the desk chair a bit overwhelmed.

He'd never looked at the magazines.

Hadn't really even bothered to check the photos.

Never realized people might like the pictures enough to-

"Hey," Daniel said softly. "I got these after I realized I liked you and

before we started dating. I-I didn't always-"

He was standing awkwardly in front of Johnny.

Tommy had mentioned that it was popular. He'd just never thought of it in that way. But he supposed people got off on anything if Cosmo was to be believed.

It was a lot of photos. A lot of Johnny.

Was it better? Worse somehow? Should it feel worse? It really didn't. It'd just been a surprise.

He knew Daniel thought he was attractive but this was...on a different level. Would he have done the same? If their roles were reversed? If he had photos of Daniel like that?

Maybe.

Probably.

It was a thought.

It was a lot of thoughts.

He leaned back a bit looking at Daniel who Johnny didn't think he'd ever seen him look so embarrassed. Standing there trying to figure out what to say, how to explain.

Curiosity and ego were floating to the top as he moved the desk chair so he could look at the photos again.

"Which one's your favorite?"

Daniel looked at him like he wanted to bury himself in the garden, but Johnny wrapped an arm around Daniel's hip, pulling him in close. He wasn't going anywhere. It'd be a way to learn more about what Daniel liked. Daniel turned his eyes towards the photos, towards the magazines on the desk, and pointed to one. One of Johnny without a shirt, glistening, flexing.

He could arrange part of that. Not the beach or the glistening.

He let go, worked on the buttons on his shirt and Daniel turned to look back at him, eyes wide.

Johnny shrugged out of it and leaned back a bit, flexing, watching as

Daniel reached out, to run his fingers over Johnny's abs, swallowing hard. He looked mesmerized. Which was an interesting thought, an interesting realization.

Maybe he could just distract Daniel by taking off his shirt and flexing.

That'd be a dangerous thing to know.

Or maybe a good thing to know.

If Daniel started to panic over something he could take off his shirt.

Would that even work?

Maybe he could try.

Next time it looked like Daniel got overwhelmed, he'd take off his shirt. See what happened.

He'd originally thought all of his muscle scared people off, like the colorful way a frog warns that its poisonous.

But instead, it seemed to draw Daniel further in. Not deterred at at all.

"Can I touch you?" Johnny asked.

It took awhile or the question to register for Daniel.

Johnny watched as the fingers touching his tense muscle paused and Daniel looked up at him, like he had to drag his focus back into the moment.

"Yeah," Daniel said.

Johnny gently pulled Daniel closer by his hips, guiding him to sit on Johnny's lap, shifting to stay as tense as possible while Daniel's fingers ghosted across his skin. It'd be an interesting experiment. To see who could hang in the longest. If Johnny flexing or Daniel under Johnny's hands.

He looked in the drawer, Daniel had mentioned something when they went camping, about how Daniel left stuff in his desk drawer, and yes, there was lube, that'd help just make things gentler.

Daniel's fingers were pressing into his muscle, curiosity peaked and distracted. Which meant he wasn't focused on Johnny's hands.

Johnny moved carefully. They'd had a busy afternoon and he worried Daniel might be a bit too sensitive, but he didn't hiss or look uncomfortable when Johnny touched him, wrapping his hand around him.

He moved his hand. This he knew. Knew how Daniel liked Johnny's hand on him. The worry was that he'd be loud. Too loud for Mr. Miyagi's house.

Maybe it was a bad idea.

Maybe this wasn't the place to do this.

But it was too late.

Johnny had already opened that box.

Daniel gasped, rolling his hips into Johnny's slick hand.

Johnny wondered if he could try something else.

Carefully.

He wanted to kiss Daniel but kissing him would block his view. And that was kind of the point. But he was being noisy and what Johnny wanted to try probably wouldn't help. He slid his hand along Daniel's spine, slowly and purposefully heading down, a note of his idea, hopefully enough for Daniel to get it. Fully understand what he wanted to try.

"Is it okay if I-?"

Daniel nodded biting his lip pushing his hips back towards Johnny's fingers, moaning as they went in, gripping hard onto Johnny bucking his hips between his hands.

Johnny kind of got it. The mesmerized look Daniel got some time when touching him, the distracted lust filled curiosity. If it was anything close to the same feeling that he had now, watching Daniel grinding on his fingers and into his hand, then he got it.

Daniel seemed to want too much at once. To take in Johnny in his gaze, to feel him, to also close his eyes and muffle his moans as he chased his pleasure, as Johnny felt around curiously until Daniel guided him to his prostrate. Johnny had had to look it up, standing awkwardly in the health and sex section of the library hoping none of

the librarians he knew found him. He'd not found it on his own, and he figure it'd take practice, but it'd be fun type of practice with Daniel.

Daniel ended up kissing him, a crushing desperate kiss full of tongue and muffled moans, trying to stay quiet.

They really needed an apartment. Their own place so that Daniel's lips and Johnny's wouldn't get bruised as they tried to contain everything. Somewhere so that they could be as loud as they wanted. So that they wouldn't have to hold back.

Daniel didn't last long and collapsed into Johnny, breathing hard as Johnny slowly pulled his hands away.

"Pictures can't do that," Johnny said softly.

Daniel gently pushed himself back up looking at the mess on Johnny, slowly catching his breath.

"True, but this is an image I would want to keep."

Johnny swallowed hard. "This is only available live and in person."

Daniel laughed softly grabbing tissues off the desk to clean up Johnny's abdoment and chest.

"Thankfully I've got a good memory."

"Are you sure? If I didn't have an idea of what you used some of these for I'd be worried that you kept them all to remember what I looked like," Johnny said teasing,motioning towards the desk, the photos.

"As I was saying earlier. I got those *before* I got the real thing. For when I missed having you by my side while I slept. Before I got to fully see all of you. When all I had was my imagination and hope that you liked me back."

Johnny glanced away as a small seed of unease that had hidden under the ego and curiosity bubbled up, something he needed to squash before it sprouted fell from his lips. "Is it as good as you imagined?"

Daniel's hands grabbed the sides of his face and pulled him into a warm kiss. "Better."

Chapter End Notes

Pictures of the 80s Fotorama and more info on it can be found here.

Mr. Miyagi is going to keep two of the photos for himself with the other photos he has of him and Daniel (like the one he looked at so sadly in KK3. I wanted him to have more happy photos) and send the other two to Yukie with a long letter.

Daniel didn't finish reading the letter from Jessica because it's like five pages front and back, but he will read it later. It's pretty much all about Ohio and being back home and a recipe to make buckeyes. Here's a recipe for buckeyes

Also couldn't figure out how to fit this in but when learning about how to put a gi on Sato and Chozen learned that Daniel didn't have his own black belt despite being at that level. Chozen had asked Johnny about the All-Valley, and Johnny mentioned how the black belt Daniel had tried to put on at the tournament was too big for him so he didn't know where Daniel had gotten it from. Thus the gift from Sato and Chozen. An actually decent gift.

Tryouts Take 2

Chapter Notes

I'm going on hiatus again for about two weeks. (Fun busy this time.)

I hope you have a wonderful Halloween! 🎃

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Saturday Dutch showed up took one look at Daniel and shook his head telling him to change. He brushed past and into their room going into the closet and picking out an outfit and pushing it into Daniel's hands. T-shirt and shorts, tennis shoes.

"Are we going running again? I thought we took the weekends off?"

"Just go change Daniel," Dutch said leaning against the desk.

Johnny handed him the envelope from Okinawa and Dutch flicked through the pictures, the magazines, and the advertisements.

Daniel sighed walking off to the bathroom to change.

He knew the guys were in town but he hadn't seen them yet. Hadn't heard from them. He was a little bummed. He'd wanted to tell them about Johnny getting him 19 bouquets and that his mom was back in town.

He'd also thought they'd do something for his birthday over the weekend, but it looked like he was back in workout mode and he was disappointed.

He'd enjoyed his week.

He felt like he'd had a mini-vacation from worrying about the future but now the gears were moving again. But it was fine. He couldn't take too long of a break. He had to keep moving forward. Barnes wasn't going to take it easy on him.

He met Dutch and Johnny out front, wishing Mr. Miyagi a good Saturday and then following them to the van, getting in with a sigh.

Johnny sat down next to him as Dutch drove, talking about working at

the shop for Daniel's birthday. Something about how he hadn't understood how busy the shop was. How now that the holidays were on the horizon the shop was swamped. How it was kind of weird to be alone with Mr. Miyagi. But how pleased Mr. Miyagi had been.

Dutch shook his head with a soft laugh.

"You guys do a lot of work in that shop and I didn't even realize it."

"It's mostly because of Daniel's hard work," Johnny said.

"You really have made Mr. Miyagi's dream come true. You should be proud of yourself. We had lunch together and were talking and Mr. Miyagi just absolutely glows when he talks about you, Daniel. He's immensely proud of you."

Every time the door opened to Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees Daniel was relieved. Happy that Mr. Miyagi's dream, his retirement was paying off. He'd worked so hard, had lived such a rough life but was always so calm, so helpful, so kind, he deserved the best, and the fact that Daniel had helped him with that, the fact Mr. Miyagi viewed him as a partner was the proudest part of his life.

Dutch drove them to a park and parked and Daniel got out and stretched.

Back to the same old same old.

Back to preparing.

To that crushing weight of the tournament.

He headed towards the path but Dutch put his hands on Daniel's shoulders and turned him, moving him in a different direction.

They walked across the grass towards a field where Jimmy, Bobby, and Tommy waited sitting at a picnic bench chatting.

There was a cooler and a grill nearby.

"You ready Daniel?" Tommy asked.

"For what?" Daniel asked confused.

Were they having a picnic?

Jimmy jerked his thumb behind him pointing across the field at a

group of guys in jerseys kicking around a soccer ball.

"What?" Daniel asked dumbfounded.

"We blocked you from playing at school, but we found an intramural team with an opening. You're trying out," Bobby said smiling warmly at him. "We owe you that at the very least."

Daniel stared at them eyes wide. "Seriously?"

"Yup," Dutch said hands on his shoulders. "They play a couple of times a month and do matches and stuff. We're going to play with them today for fun, but the goal is that you join."

"We've been watching the local teams for months waiting for an opening, and finally there's one. One of their players moved to Canada, so if you're up for it, then we'll do our best to make you look good."

"Figured you could enjoy it after the tournament."

"Yeah we did warn them that you had a karate tournament coming up," Tommy said with a soft laugh. "The captain thought that was cool. Asked if you could do flips."

"Not like Johnny can," Daniel said softly, still stunned. "But it's gotten better than it was."

"Ready?" Johnny asked.

Daniel nodded. He couldn't believe they'd found him a soccer team to try out for. He'd given up on his dreams to play soccer in LA. He kept sinking into the karate sandpit and every time he crawled out of it something shoved him back in.

The guys introduced him to the others on the team. It wasn't their full team, just the ones that were free that weekend. It was a lot of people to meet but they shook Daniel's hand and quickly moved on to play.

It'd been a while since Daniel had gotten to play with a team. He hadn't gotten to do anything soccer-related since...he couldn't remember the last time. But it was like riding a bike he supposed. Once he was on the field, once the game began he was running, darting around the other team, jumping out of the way, focused on the ball, paying attention to where his teammates, the rest of the guys, and a few other players from the intermural team were. Passing the

ball, catching it with his feet, kicking it up and across the field towards a waiting teammate.

He'd missed it. He'd missed running for fun, chasing after a ball, working as a group, working with people with a goal in mind.

Karate was a solo sport and one that usually ended up bruised from hits that were almost always personal.

Soccer was a community.

The morning bled into the afternoon and Daniel lost track of time until hands were clapping on his shoulders and they were sitting around to take a break, to have lunch. It'd been a workout, but it'd been a fun workout.

Karate and all that training had made him lighter on his feet, faster. It all lent itself perfectly to soccer.

Tommy handed him a sports drink while Jimmy set up at the grill making lunch, grilling hot dogs.

"So," the team captain said sitting down across from Daniel. "Don't know if your friends mentioned it but we've got an opening. We play across California and sometimes travel across the country for games if we do well enough in our matches. It's a commitment, and we know you're busy until what? Mid-January for that karate tournament? What was it again Bobby? All-stars?"

"All-Valley," Bobby said.

"Right, so after that," the captain said pulling out a printed-out calendar, and a packet of paper. "You want in?"

Daniel took the paper, all the games and practices, and locations. He'd had so much fun. He had forgotten how much fun it was. How much he'd missed it.

"Yes," Daniel said.

"Awesome man. My number is on there, I'm just going to need your contact info and emergency contact and whatnot. Get that to me in a couple of weeks. There's a list of stuff for the membership and a fee for team uniforms and for like gas to get to the places. Just a little bit of paperwork and then we'll see you after your tournament. It'll be cool to have a black belt on our team. Good luck in your match," he

said clapping Daniel on the shoulder before walking off back to grab some food.

Daniel sat holding the welcome packet looking back at the guys.

"He looks so happy it kind of hurts to look at him," Jimmy said with a laugh.

"Congrats man," Bobby said.

"Guess we've got soccer games to add to our calendars, you'll have to give us the dates and locations," Tommy said.

Johnny filled two plates with food, grilled hot dogs and chips, and fruit then sat down next to Daniel passing him a plate.

"I'm sorry it took so long."

Daniel blinked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"Playing soccer together. It took a long time. I waited for your knee to heal and then we went to Okinawa and then got busy."

Daniel gently squeezed his hand. "It doesn't matter how long, it's wonderful. I had a lot of fun playing with everyone and am excited to be a part of a team again."

Johnny smiled softly back, squeezing his hand.

"Sorry again for ruining your chance to join the school team in the first place."

"Consider that debt paid," Daniel said smiling warmly.

"So I mentioned your birthday was this week," Bobby said setting a large box onto the table. "And my parents made you a cake, so I didn't get a chance to. They beat me to it."

Bobby lifted the lid and Daniel stared at a cake covered in shaved chocolate and mini cookies sticking up out of the icing.

"What flavor is it?" Tommy asked sitting down with his plate of food.

"Cookie dough," Bobby said. "I was going to make you a pirate ship. But maybe I'll make you a pirate ship next year."

"That reminds me," Jimmy said putting out the fire of the grill and

sitting down to join them. "So we got you a gift, it's twofold."

"Twofold?" Daniel asked.

"After the tournament, we were thinking we'd go to San Francisco, so we're going to drive up together and you get your own room, and we'll explore. But the trip is on us."

"We thought it'd be fun, a way to celebrate it being over," Tommy said.

"And we'll be off from school," Bobby said. "So we can leave Friday morning and then drive up."

"It's like a six-hour drive," Dutch said.

"So what's the second part?" Daniel asked.

"Ah, well we were talking to your mom," Jimmy said popping a chip in his mouth with a crunch.

"And she mentioned that your grandpa has this big party in January, sometime after the tournament."

"Yeah," Daniel said.

"So we've booked you tickets to Newark from San Francisco to go. We'll drop you off at the airport and then cover you for a week or so at Mr. Miyagi's so you can go."

"There is one question though," Dutch said leaning close.

"What?" Daniel asked.

"Are you wanting to take Johnny with you?" Tommy asked. "We booked him a ticket but we can also keep him entertained while you're gone."

"I'm not like a toddler," Johnny said with a frown.

Dutch slapped Johnny on the back, hard. "We know man, but you've been honeymooning with Daniel for months. If he leaves you're going to get mopey. If we're sending Daniel away we're not going to leave you to mope."

"Do you still want to go?" Daniel asked Johnny.

"I mean, sure. It was on our list," Johnny said. "If you and your family will be okay with me coming along."

"Of course," Daniel said. "Nonnio and Nonnia will be happy to see you."

"Okay, then where do you want to stay?" Tommy asked digging a notebook out of his pocket and a pen. "So we can book the place."

"Oh no thank you," Daniel said quickly.

Tommy looked up at him surprised.

"If we stay at a hotel my whole family will get offended," Daniel said. "My uncle booked a hotel when he was getting a divorce thinking it'd keep things from getting awkward and every time he drops the kids off the family gives him the cold shoulder and mutters about how he was too good to stay with anyone. We *have* to stay with someone."

"Really?" Johnny asked like Daniel had just pointed to a mountain and told him to climb it in five minutes while carrying a bag full of dictionaries. Resigned to have a bad time.

"Yeah, but there is a loophole," Daniel said. "I can call my godfathers and see if we can crash with them."

"That's a loophole?" Johnny asked.

"Well, they're on the same street so we'd be within walking distance. And they've got a guest bedroom. It wouldn't be crowded like with my aunt or uncles. And," Daniel smiled softly patting Johnny's hand. "You wouldn't have to worry about getting stuck with Louie Jr."

"You sure that's going to be okay?" Bobby asked.

"Oh yeah, of course! My godparents are family so it counts," Daniel said.

"And they'll be fine that you're bringing Johnny to a family thing?" Dutch asked as Bobby started slicing up the cake and passing out slices.

"Nonnia knitted Johnny a sweater," Daniel said.

"Oh, from that package you got for your birthday?" Tommy asked looking at Johnny.

Johnny nodded thanking Dutch as he was passed a slice of cake.

"It was a nice sweater, but what does that have to do with anything?" Jimmy asked.

Daniel looked down at his cake with a frown. "Nonnia doesn't knit for anyone."

"Okay? Keep going, we're not getting it," Bobby said taking a bite of the cake motioning to Daniel with his plastic fork in a circle.

Daniel shifted uncomfortably.

How could he mention that his Nonnia and Nonnio essentially looked at Johnny and were like *ah yes, nice blonde California boy, we're keeping him*? That no one got a sweater like that when they were dating? That Nonnia and Nonnio had jumped twenty steps ahead, past dating for years, past a first apartment, straight into married? He supposed he'd have to warn Johnny eventually because he'd hear. His cousins, his aunts, and uncles wouldn't be quiet about it.

"They're like....family only?" Daniel said.

"Like a letterman?" Jimmy asked.

"Or like a wedding gift?" Tommy asked with an eyebrow raised.

They laughed. But Daniel didn't laugh. He poked around at his cake.

The laughter around him stopped and he felt the sudden silence, the eyes on him.

"Johnny, what the hell did you do when you visited Newark?" Dutch asked.

"Did you propose?" Bobby asked.

All their eyes were on Johnny.

"I didn't do anything!" Johnny said hands up. "I just met them is all."

He was pink, startled. Daniel set his fork down and rubbed at his own face and groaned.

"No one proposed. Nothing happened. Just Nonnio and Nonnia liked Johnny and...I don't know. But it's like a thing okay? Like if Johnny doesn't go Nonnio and Nonnia will be asking where he is and why

didn't he come with me and they'll worry that something happened and their feelings will be hurt. And I want him to come. But as soon as everyone sees him, my cousins, my aunt, and uncles they're going to talk. Because no one outside of the family gets a sweater like that until they've married into the family and sometimes even then it's like....delayed. Nonnia sometimes, she doesn't like people, she's hard to please and she won't make one for people until like they've been married for a while. So the fact Johnny was sent one **now**, before we even have been dating a year? I just turned 19, Johnny's 18, like no one this young gets these sweaters. And Nonnia sent me one that matches. It's like she's saying *I expect both of you to show up in these* and everyone will know. Like the whole family will take one look, and the fact they're matching? My parents got matching sweaters for their **fifth** wedding anniversary. Before that-Nonnia is like skipping ahead and it's sweet and terrifying. I like that she and Nonnio like Johnny. But that's a lot of pressure to put on a relationship. Because Johnny's only met them and Louie Jr. and it's-"

Johnny gently turned Daniel towards him, pulling on him gently.

"Okay, a bigger deal than I thought," he said.

He was pink, ears burning red.

The guys were quiet.

"But it's fine."

"It's fine?" Daniel squeaked. "How's it fine? Like we can't get married, so like is that why Nonnia made them? I don't know what she's thinking. Like maybe after a couple of years. Sure we live together, but we live with Mr. Miyagi. We've only known each other for a year and we were awful to each other at first-"

Johnny pulled Daniel closer, into his arms, resting his chin on top of Daniel's head.

"I guess I've got to go to Nonnio's birthday, should I pretend we're married around your cousins? Or partners I guess is what- is that what people call it?"

"How are you so calm? Why aren't you refusing to come with me? It's weird. I told Ma, it's a lot, even she knows it's a lot. That it's weird. But Nonnia was adament. Nonnia has like 5 other sweaters that she was supposed to make and she made you one and one for me. I already have a sweater. I didn't need another. But she made me one

anyway."

Johnny hummed thoughtfully and Daniel frowned. How was he not freaking out? Anyone would be freaking out. Running for the hills. Daniel wanted to run for the hills. He also wanted to watch his family bicker and get jealous over the fact his Nonnia liked Johnny that much. But he expected Johnny to freak out.

"Wow," Jimmy said softly. "I thought my family was complicated."

"Right?" Dutch said with a laugh. "Man I always thought my parents would put pressure on my relationships. I never even fathomed someone's grandparents being the people you have to impress."

Daniel pressed at Johnny trying to push away, to look at him, to give him an out, a chance to escape what was bound to be a weird family event.

Johnny pulled back only a little, gazing at him, he didn't look uncomfortable or panicked. Not like he was going to run which Daniel had expected. Had thought he'd have that startled deer in headlights look.

"I guess I'm just too charming for the LaRusso family," he said with a grin. "Your grandparents want to keep me."

"Yeah, for *me*," Daniel said.

How was he fine with it? It wasn't just an ego boost. It wasn't just a light thing. They expected Johnny to stick around. A long time, with Daniel. And Daniel wanted that but, the future wasn't promised.

What if Kreese and Silver and Barnes got their wish?

What if the tournament left Daniel broken beyond repair?

What if Johnny got hurt again?

What if something happened down the road?

It wasn't a simple stamp of approval. There was more to it.

Daniel sighed pressing his forehead into Johnny's chest.

"Well you are my favorite LaRusso," Johnny said. "Wouldn't go with any other."

"The only other one you've met is Louie Jr."

"Like I said, you're my favorite."

"Do you not get how big of a deal this is?"

"I get it. What does Nonnio want for his birthday?"

"I don't know. Ma usually gets him something from the both of us."

"Well, that won't fly anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"Well now that Nonnia has made us a unit, then it's got to be from us. We've got to pick something out. That's how that stuff works right?"

Daniel hadn't even thought of that. He'd planned to just let his mother pick something. But Johnny was right. Maybe he should skip it this year. Send Nonnio a card from the hospital after the tournament. Maybe he'd let Barnes get a bunch of good hits in so that he'd have an excuse not to go. No, if he did Barnes would kill him.

"What's he like?" Bobby asked.

"Saltwater taffy," Johnny said.

"You should take something from California," Tommy said.

"We'll help you pick something out."

"Gotta make a good impression on your new family," Dutch said with a laugh.

They started talking about potential gifts, each passing out ideas and Daniel looked at Johnny, smiling and no longer blushing. It'd been something overwhelming, something he thought might scare Johnny off, or make him uncomfortable. But he was taking it in stride, like it was fine, not a problem, totally normal for a large Italian family in New Jersey to adopt you as family before you even started dating their grandson. Johnny's hand found his again, giving it a gentle squeeze and Daniel relaxed. It would be fun. They would make it fun.

Chapter End Notes

Cookie dough cake

You Still Have Time

Johnny grabbed a 6 pack of beers from the Avanti and the board game Clue that he shoved under his other arm. He eyed his go bag and his bonsai, but his arms were too full, he'd have to come back, before walking up to the beach house.

It was quiet.

Only one other car in the lot.

He walked up the painted steps to the house and shifted everything in his arms to push the doorbell.

Tommy opened the door.

Usually, he was dressed nicely. 364 out of 365 days Tommy cared about how he looked, how he was perceived. But not today.

Never this specific day.

He stared at Johnny for a moment then stepped ever so slightly out of the way.

Johnny headed to the kitchen to put the beer in the fridge, knowing there was an 80% chance it was full of Chinese food.

Tommy followed him listlessly and Johnny looked around, to see if there was anything he needed to do, anything that could be done.

"Didn't think you'd come this year," Tommy said softly.

"I'm your ride," Johnny said.

"Where's Daniel?"

"At his mom's."

They'd spent the weekend helping Mrs. LaRusso set up her new apartment. Taking everything from Jimmy's to her new place, putting everything in its new spot.

Though Laura, was unhappy Mrs. LaRusso was moving so far away. Complained that there was a perfectly nice empty lot only like a block away from her house.

He was pretty sure she was just going to miss the company. The girl's night sleepovers, having a wine buddy who could cook so well and who was fun to talk to. He had to remind her multiple times that it was better than Newark. She was really only ten minutes away.

He had to tell her to put her wallet away when she said she could just buy the lot, *in case Lucille changes her mind*.

It was a nice apartment. Two bedrooms, two baths, with its own terrace garden that she was excited to grow herbs on, an actual pool that Daniel was delighted by, and plenty of space. One of the first things to celebrate, after cooking them all dinner in her new kitchen as thanks, was to have Daniel over for the night.

"Why didn't you go with?" Tommy asked.

"He hasn't had alone time with his mom since before summer. They need time to themselves," Johnny said.

Daniel had stood awkwardly in their room asking if Johnny would be okay for the night without him. Johnny had been trying to figure out how to explain he wasn't going to be there that night either.

He just smiled and told Daniel he'd be fine, teased him asking if Daniel would be okay if he needed to take the whale plush with him.

Daniel had said he could sleep by himself, but he did pack the whale shark into the Ford.

Johnny had helped him carry his stuff out to the car leaning against the door as Daniel faltered. Excited to spend time with his mother, not wanting to leave Johnny, worried about Mr. Miyagi. Johnny had leaned over and kissed him. Told him to have fun with his mom. They had a lot to catch up on. That everything would be fine. To not worry. Teased him for a moment when he looked back at Johnny breathless from the kiss if he wanted Johnny to grab one of the magazines, in case he was worried he'd forget what Johnny looked like.

Daniel had flushed bright red, smacking Johnny's arm without any real strength to it. He knew Daniel was taking the photos from Okinawa to show his mom, the photos from New York, stuff that his mom had missed. But he recovered quickly pulling Johnny in for another kiss. "I told you now that I've had the real thing I don't need it anymore. I've got enough memorized and in my memory to outshine those."

There was something in that tone that sent a shiver down Johnny's spine, Daniel grinning when he pulled away again, another quick kiss a sweet *see you later* before driving off.

"Want to go now or do you want to start with Clue?" Johnny asked turning to Tommy.

"Clue," Tommy said.

Clue was meant to be played with a minimum of three players, but Johnny and Tommy had figured out a system years ago to up the challenge for when it was just the two of them, during this yearly tradition. It just required them to dump about a third of the deck into a mystery pile as they played.

Johnny carried the board out to the table near the balcony and set up the game.

Tommy sunk heavily across from him, grabbing a blanket and wrapping it around himself watching Johnny set up the board silently.

There was one other tradition that he had to get over.

The answer was always no even though Johnny never understood why.

"Want me to call the guys?"

Tommy was quiet. As quiet as he always was, every year. Probably as quiet as he had been those years before they'd become friends.

Their first year of being friends Tommy hadn't shown up for their hang-out time and he'd asked the guys who'd shrugged, too into their game at the arcade.

They all went to different schools.

Didn't know each other's schedules, had other friends and other responsibilities.

Maybe he's got homework.

Could be grounded.

Probably got sick, you know how late he stays reading those mystery novels.

But Johnny got worried.

Tommy planned a lot of things and was so organized that it seemed strange that he wasn't there. He'd gone to Tommy's aunt and uncle's house and Tommy wasn't there. His aunt quietly shook her head, not telling him where he was, just saying no when he asked if Tommy was home.

Johnny had been to the beach house once before, so he took the bus to the nearest stop and walked the rest of the way to the private beach, around the security gate and he knocked.

He hadn't known what to expect. Figured Tommy probably wasn't there.

Maybe he was out with other friends.

Maybe there'd been a book signing that he got tickets to last minute.

Maybe he'd found cooler friends.

The door had been unlocked and open, the late December wind whistling through the house.

Johnny had gone in, not even thinking about it.

Not even realizing how stupid it was to walk into a house with the doors open.

He didn't want to start a mystery novel in his life, but he was worried.

He found Tommy sitting on the balcony looking out at the ocean.

"Hey, you okay?" Johnny had asked, knowing immediately the answer was no.

His shoulders were too slumped, too pulled inward. Too pale.

Tommy had jumped but didn't turn to face Johnny.

Johnny sat down next to him out on the balcony, letting his legs hang over the edge. They'd sat silently next to one another watching the tide and the horizon.

"Want me to call the guys?" Johnny had asked after a while.

Tommy had whirled wide-eyed, panicked. "No!"

Johnny had known Tommy had been crying. But it was starker when he turned to face him.

There were things you didn't feel like sharing sometimes. Large gaping wounds that even after years of being alone you didn't trust other people around. Johnny had understood at the time. But now he thought Kreese had exasperated it. Had made it seem like asking for help, for asking for a shoulder to cry on, for people to be there was a weakness. And that's why they all held so much in. Why Dutch never mentioned how much it hurt that his parents weren't ever home. Why Bobby didn't complain about losing the number one student position to Johnny or the pressure he was under at home to be a good older brother and how Jimmy had struggled for so long to tell his parents he didn't want to take over the family business.

"Maybe later," Tommy said quietly in front of him, bringing the blanket up over his head.

It was a first. A first that Tommy would let this spread past the two of them. That maybe the guys would know.

He wondered if it was because of Daniel. Because he'd seen how they were with him. Because they'd shown that despite everything Kreese had tried to teach them, that it hadn't all stuck. That they'd shaken a lot of it off. Had snuck a bunch of stuff that Kreese never would've approved into their lives, into their friendship.

They played a round of Clue, Johnny getting up partway through to get Tommy a cold beer popping off the cap and flicking it into the trash on the other side of the room. The ghost of a smile on Tommy's lips.

"You remember when I got stung by a jellyfish?" Tommy asked taking a sip.

"Yes," Johnny said.

It'd been one of the first times Tommy had invited him over. It'd just been him like Tommy was testing the waters of friendship. Trying to figure it out. They'd raced on the beach and Tommy ran into the water and let out a howl of pain. Johnny had rushed after him.

"You carried me out, hotwired my uncle's car, and drove me to hospital."

He hadn't been old enough to drive yet. Hadn't had a license. His bike had been totaled by Sid.

He hadn't gotten his motorbike yet, it was all Johnny could think to do.

He'd read how to hotwire a car in a book at the library. That and how to pick a lock.

He'd studied it in case he needed to make a getaway.

But instead, he used it to steal his friend's uncle's car to get him to the hospital.

Lifeguards usually had kits to deal with jellyfish stings, but Johnny hadn't known that at the time, hadn't dated the lifeguard yet. Though because it was a private beach there wasn't a lifeguard.

In hindsight, it'd been very stupid. He should've called Tommy's uncle and told him what had happened, but he'd panicked. It was one of the things that had earned him ace degenerate. Hotwiring a car and stealing it.

Tommy had told all the guys and it'd become a bigger thing.

He'd returned it, apologized to Tommy's uncle who'd stared at him in shock as he explained what had happened at the hospital, telling him how he'd gotten them there.

He'd expected Tommy's uncle to tell him to never come around again. That he wasn't welcome. But his hand had come down on his shoulder.

"That was dangerous," he'd said.

Johnny was used to the hands on his shoulders being bad. Sid trying to crush his shoulder beneath his hand, Kreese's fingers digging in.

"I'm glad you both got here in one piece and you got him here so fast. Next time, you can call emergency services, but a man of action makes a good leader, a good friend."

Johnny had been stunned. Tommy's uncle wasn't going to tell Sid. Wasn't all fire and fury and pissed. And when Tommy's aunt arrived all worried in tears she'd thrown her arms around the *both* of them.

He'd expected to be yelled at.

No one did.

Instead, they bought him dinner, and then four of them had it in Tommy's hospital room.

It was how Johnny had met the lifeguard he'd dated that one summer. By taking lifeguard training so he'd know what to do. Learning how to remove the stingers from the wound, how to properly clean it, how to know whether it required a trip to an emergency room or if it didn't.

"It was so vastly different from the time **you** got stung," Tommy said with a sigh, hand around the beer. "You were out in the water then quietly came out and beelined straight to my uncle who was on the balcony. All of us were setting up for lunch and you said, 'Sir I've been stung by a jellyfish.' Calm as could be. Which I don't know how because it hurts like hell. But I think I know why now. After this summer."

Johnny lowered his gaze to the board. He'd learned long before Sid how to hide his pain, how to not cry when he got hurt, because it always drew more attention. More ire. He'd just perfected it with Sid and Kreese. How to swallow that pain deeper.

Tommy moved on to his second beer. Handing it over to Johnny to open, watching the cap fly through the air before taking it back.

"I brought flowers," Johnny said.

"Thanks," Tommy said, voice small and tight.

It had taken four hours of sitting on the balcony that first year for Tommy to move on. For Tommy to realize Johnny wasn't going to budge. That his patience had no end, that he wasn't going back to playing arcade games with the guys. That he knew something was wrong.

He'd gotten up, put on his shoes, and shoved his hands into his pockets and Johnny had followed.

It was a long walk.

Too long from the beach house, up the winding roads, walking along the sidewalk, head down to the cemetery.

Loving parents

Johnny had taken in the dates, did the math. Tommy had been young. They'd been young. The same day.

"Car crash," Tommy said quietly.

The first thing he'd said in hours.

Johnny stood next to him as Tommy stared hard down at the stone, at the words, crying as quietly as he could, trying to make it seem like he wasn't. Johnny eventually reached out and pulled him into a hug. He'd been unsure for too long, unsure whether to hug him or not. Whether a guy who spent the day alone, away from his family, who kept it from his friends would want a hug. But it'd helped. Uncorked something.

Johnny came back every year. Met Tommy at the beach house. Brought Clue or a board game, something to do while Tommy worked up the courage for his visit. When he got his Honda XL 600R he drove Tommy there. Then would drive him in the Avanti.

He learned that his aunt and uncle stocked the fridge with food, knowing Tommy wanted to be alone that day, to mourn and to take his time, their numbers tacked up on the fridge, a reminder that they were there if he wanted them there. But he never called.

It was one year after too many beers that Tommy told him his biggest fear, why he spent most of it alone, why he didn't tell his friends, why he hadn't told his classmates.

"I'm scared that one day it'll just be me. That everyone will leave and I'll be dying all alone with no one around to visit or care and I'll die forgotten, out of time before I should be."

Johnny had grabbed his hand. "You won't be alone."

"My aunt and uncle are the only family I have left. There's no guarantee that they'll be around forever-one day-"

"You can't get rid of me."

Tommy had looked at him so startled.

"I'll be there."

"What if we stop being friends?"

"Never."

"What if we don't see each other for a long time?"

"Then call. I'll come immediately. No matter what."

Tommy had looked stunned.

All the arguments dying on his lips.

Johnny had been serious.

Even if they'd drifted apart if Tommy needed him if any of the guys needed him he'd make it.

He'd get there.

But he hoped it never became that.

He hoped that he'd see them more. That they wouldn't drift apart. And now he knew they wouldn't. He knew he'd see Tommy often. That Daniel wouldn't let it happen. The guys wouldn't let it happen. They were all holding onto one another too tightly to let it happen. And maybe Tommy got that now too. Understood it when he said *maybe*.

Tommy won and after his third beer, he gave Johnny a nod. "Okay. This year...call them."

Johnny nodded, hand going warmly to Tommy's shoulder, before getting up and calling. He wouldn't tell them why they needed to be there. That was for Tommy to tell them when he wanted when he was ready. But he told them to come, to bring beer. That there was plenty of Chinese food. Maybe they'd spend the night so to bring something to sleep in. Then he sat down next to Tommy an arm around his shoulder.

"I thought I wanted to be a detective," Tommy said quietly as he held one of the cards in his hand. "I wanted to solve mysteries. But I think I don't want to do that anymore."

"No?" Johnny asked.

"I think I want to be someone who makes bigger changes, a bigger impact, who has more say in the world we live in."

"Yeah?"

"I liked student government. I think-I think I may try and do something similar."

"FBI still solves cases."

Tommy let out a sound that sounded amused, dropping the card on the table. "I'll think about it."

"Figuring out your identity?"

"Yeah. I hate that class. Because they want you to be honest. Which means I tell them...I write...I say... that I'm an orphan. I don't feel like an orphan. It's a technicality. I have my aunt and uncle. But I also don't have...It's just a lot of the little boxes they want to categorize us in, some of it's...painful. I've rewritten my final paper thirty-five times. I don't know what to write. Hello, I'm Thomas, I go by Tommy. I'm a college freshman who likes detective novels and I'm an orphan. It sounds like AA."

Tommy lifted his beer and wrinkled his nose with a frown.

"Tommy, student council member of his high school. Organized planner, well-loved by his classmates, popular with the girls even though he rarely dated any of them because he was worried about losing their friendship and he's a bit of a perfectionist. He likes detective novels and solving mysteries and thought he wanted to be a private detective like Batman he has decided maybe he wants to work on bigger problems with the government. He's studied karate and is a great friend whose observant and shows up. He's going to do great at whatever he picks and if he doesn't get too worried, too scared, then he's going to make tons of new friends in college, and watch out he's probably going to be your valedictorian. You should sign up now for his study groups, you'll want to have said you knew him when."

Tommy laughed, a real laugh brushing away tears with his palms.

"I'm sure the other guys are also struggling with that project," Johnny said softly.

"You think? They've known what they wanted to do. Jimmy's wanted to be a lawyer for a while and Bobby's wanted to be a pastor. Their family...their lines are a little stronger you know? Hell, even Dutch knows who he is."

"You're 19 Tommy. You're not meant to fully know who you are yet. You're still at the beginning of your story. You're not even a fourth of the way through. There's still so much to learn about who you are and who you want to be. And yeah, it's different, it sucks. It really does suck, and if you're not ready to talk about it, not to an impersonal

class of 1000 or so then you don't have to. They can't make you. You can leave that in the drafts for yourself to explore. You don't need to cut yourself up and show your wounds to your classmates or your teacher or anyone if you don't want to. Except maybe a doctor or professional if it gets bad. Only people you like or trust and in your own time. The point of the class, in my opinion, after having read your reading and syllabus and listening to you all, is to try and better understand who you are because you're on your own for the first time.

"You're not living with your aunt and uncle. You're not surrounded by people you've always known, your classmates who've known you since you were little. You're one in the crowd now. You're not part of the student council, you're no longer under the same scrutiny or pressure. You can discover who you want to be, what you want to do. You may realize that you were wearing masks. That you were doing things because everyone else was, or there are parts of yourself you hid away but didn't realize it was actually okay, just because you hadn't found the right people, or the right space to spread out, to take up space.

"I think they want you to claim the parts of yourself your proud of. To stand tall and say this is who I am. But no one needs to know everything. You can stand in that spotlight and say "I kicked ass in student council, organizing a trip to New York City with a bunch of kids from California, no one got lost and no one got left behind because they couldn't afford it." Because that is badass Tommy. We had 100% attendance on the senior trip because you made sure everyone came. You can say "I was unanimously voted prom king by my entire grade" because everyone knew how much work you put in because you knew everyone in our class. You talked to everyone, even people who you didn't particularly like. You still listened to them. You put the work in, the effort and it came back. It crowned you king. You don't have to say that when you were little your parents got into a car crash and died. You don't have to tell them that you're hurting or scared. You can take your time to deal with that. You have time. It may take your whole life, but you keep putting one foot in front of the other, you keep your head up, even on days when it's hard, and when it's too hard you know I've got you, that *we've* got you. Because that's how it works. We know you've got us if things go bad, and you need to know we're there too."

"Damnit, Johnny." Tommy sniffed.

Johnny smiled squeezing his shoulder gently. "And they're all going to be here too. Because you asked."

"I never asked *you* to be here," Tommy whispered.

"I know. But you can't get rid of me," Johnny said.

"Even though we're not cobras?"

"Especially because we're no longer cobras."

Tommy nodded thoughtfully sipping at his beer.

"What would you write?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, ace degenerate," Tommy said with a soft laugh.

"It depends on the audience I guess. To myself, after Okinawa, it was: *not as evil as I thought I was.*"

Tommy turned to him eyes wide. "You are not evil."

"I was pretty brutal for a while there."

"But *evil*, Johnny that's, that's harsher- you never, a guy-" Tommy was stumbling, offended on Johnny's behalf. He smacked Johnny's shoulder. "Seriously that's what you thought?"

"Yeah," Johnny said. "Between Sid saying I was worthless and Kreese- when Ali broke up with me and how I hurt Daniel-"

"You carried me to the hospital! You showed up every year and sat with me even when I didn't say anything, even when I told you not to tell anyone, evil people don't do that. An-an evil person would've told Kreese or the guys and I would've been made fun of, but you didn't- you never said a word."

"That's why it depends on my audience."

"But you are an important audience to yourself! You need to be kinder to yourself!"

"I'm working on it. Things have been better. That's why I said *after* Okinawa. I needed that. I needed a chance to leave what I was used to. I guess kind of like college for you guys. A chance to be somewhere where almost no one knew me and had a chance to actually know me. And now I feel like I have a better handle on it. Especially after you guys helped my mom. After she divorced Sid. That was like a sack of

bricks sitting on my chest constantly."

"Anytime," Tommy said.

Johnny turned to him, tilting his head so Tommy's eyes met his. "Same for me, being here, **anytime**."

He heard the sound of cars coming up the lane and Tommy scrubbed at his face.

Johnny got up to open the door.

Bobby looked at him, a million questions in his eyes, followed by Jimmy and Dutch but Johnny didn't say a word just holding the door open.

At least this year there'd be more people to play Clue together. They wouldn't have to keep cutting out part of the deck.

Jimmy was carrying a bunch of beer that he carried off to the fridge.

"Damn that's a lot of Chinese food."

Tommy slowly made his way towards them sitting down at the island in the kitchen.

Johnny got a glass and filled it with water, setting it down in front of him.

"You sure you don't want me to cook you something, Tommy? I could get steaks, grill something," Jimmy said.

"Maybe next year," Tommy said softly.

Johnny smiled, gently patting his shoulder and sitting down next to him. It'd take time to heal, especially such an old deep wound and it'd never go away, but it needed to be cared after, and this, all of this was a good step. One in the right direction.

They played another round of Clue, ate Chinese food, and then Tommy stood up turning to Johnny.

"Ready."

Johnny nodded putting on his red leather jacket and grabbing his keys to the Avanti.

The guys followed quietly and Tommy sat up front holding the bouquet, the bonsai on his lap, glancing at it then at Johnny like maybe he got it. Understood the comfort of the weight of a tree you can hold in your hands, in your lap. Something small and ancient, alive in the purest way.

The guys sat quietly in the back, talking softly about school, about taekwondo as Johnny drove the road he'd taken for the last five years, once a year with Tommy.

It wasn't his road, it wasn't his path, but sometimes it helped to have someone take that road with you. Sometimes it just helped to have someone silently next to you when you needed it, to know you weren't alone, that you were seen.

He parked and followed Tommy up that familiar path, standing a little away while Tommy visited. While the guys read the tombstone, did the math just like Johnny had, how long it had been that he'd held that pain in on his own. That they hadn't ever asked or talked about. Had known instinctively not to pry, to just wait. Until Tommy turned, the smallest sliver of an invitation, and they surrounded him, pulling him into a warm comforting embrace. One Johnny was sure he'd needed for a long time but was just too hurt to reach out for it, too worried about being weak with the words of Kreese in his head, too worried about ending up alone. But he wasn't. They weren't. They had each other. They'd sit together and eat Chinese food at the beach house and they'd play Clue and they'd spend the night and they'd be there, whenever he fell, to turn around and take his hand, to help him back up. Just like they did for each other, every step of the way. Year after year.

Strike First! Strike Hard! No Mercy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daniel couldn't sleep. Johnny had fallen asleep, at least for part of the night, until Daniel had sat up, frustrated, unable to sleep. It seemed to wake up Johnny who looked at him bleary-eyed.

"The tournament?"

He supposed it was obvious. Everything else in his life was great.

His mother was back home and she had a new apartment that was warm and cozy and better than the apartment at South Seas. He'd even gotten to see her at least once a week.

They'd closed on an apartment of their own for after the tournament, one that his mother, Ms. Lawrence and Mr. Miyagi had given their stamp of approval on when they'd narrowed down the possibilities. It had been fun to see the look on the realtor's face when they showed up with the three of them.

Soon they'd have their own space and then it'd just be Johnny and him. Together. No one they knew on the other end of the walls. And they could do anything.

He had friends.

He saw Ali at least once a month.

He talked to Jessica on the phone for an hour at least once a month.

He got postcards from Kumiko.

The guys came by often. He saw Dutch almost daily.

The guys had even offered to spend the night, offered to spend the week, so he wouldn't feel alone in that time leading up to the tournament. But Daniel already felt like he was suffocating and the only thing that helped was kata with Mr. Miyagi and holding onto Johnny and feeling grounded.

But it was the night before. The night before the final end of this

nightmare that had been dumped on his lap.

He hadn't wanted it.

He wanted it gone.

He didn't know what would happen.

Would he have to lie about his age to get in?

Johnny rubbed soothing circles on his back, had offered just about anything to help with the stress and Daniel hated that he'd turned him down, but he couldn't enjoy it. Couldn't focus on him. He told Johnny that they'd do something when it was over. They'd go somewhere or break in their new apartment. Which was a weird way to say it but even though it'd been odd Johnny had still gotten the message and blushed.

Now though Johnny's arm had wrapped around his waist as he was moving, sitting up, pulling Daniel against him.

"You'll be fine," Johnny said softly.

"Will I be?" Daniel whispered. "Will we all be? They're going to crush me so they can open more dojos, so they can erase Mr. Miyagi, torment him, and they-they said they were going to *kill* you."

"I'm not scared," Johnny said.

"I am!"

"It's okay. It's okay to be scared," Johnny said. "But you got to keep moving."

Daniel sighed.

He was sure Johnny had lived in fear for most of his life, always kept moving, he ran when in a dangerous situation unless he got backed into a corner until Kreese got his hands on him and trained him to fight instead.

Daniel went to fight mode first. Came up swinging. But he was scared he'd freeze instead and then it'd be over.

He buried his head against Johnny.

"I only won one of those fights, really, and even then, *barely*."

He meant the tournament and the deathmatch.

Chozen hadn't put his all in.

It'd been a show and now that Daniel knew, his confidence had been flagging.

He was pissed.

He was also terrified.

Would just get rooted in the spot as he realized what awaited him?

It'd be like the other tournament but *worse*.

He didn't know how but it would be.

He feared it'd be a blood bath.

"You've improved so much, you just need to trust yourself," Johnny said, fingers still running up and down his back. "But you need some rest before a tournament."

Daniel got that, but sleeping wasn't easy. His mind was going every which way.

Reminding him that *technically* the crane kick had been illegal so he hadn't even really won against Johnny.

He doubted Silver would let him get away with that again.

That Chozen had faked his loss.

Johnny hummed a thoughtful note before leaning back, wiggling out of his t-shirt. He set it aside in the bed and Daniel stared at him. Didn't he remember that Daniel could barely focus his static-y panicked mind and couldn't *enjoy* anything? That the whole tournament had ruined everything? Made him a stressed guy who could barely focus?

He'd burnt eggs yesterday morning. **Eggs**!

Johnny pulled him back in, back into his arms, shifting down and laying down, taking Daniel with him, running his fingers through Daniel's hair.

"Breathe Daniel," Johnny said softly. "You can't do anything about it right now."

Daniel wanted to protest, wanted to say that thinking helped, if he could just think of a solution, some way out then it'd be okay.

He was thinking about running to Mexico with Johnny and Mr. Miyagi. Kiss their nice new apartment goodbye.

But the arms around him were holding tight, biceps.

Daniel put his hand on Johnny's arm feeling the taut muscle.

He ran his fingers along his arm, pressing in occasionally, there was no give, not like normal.

It wasn't soft, squishy, he was flexing.

Daniel had once thought he was a peacock and that Johnny was something else because they weren't on the same wavelength, Johnny couldn't tell that Daniel was flirting.

But this was almost like a peacock, sending up those colorful feathers. Instead of feathers though he was flexing his muscles that Daniel liked. He ran his fingers along his arm he was flexing almost all of them, his pecs, his abs.

Daniel ran his fingers over his skin.

If Daniel didn't love it, he'd consider it unfair.

Unfair that he was the one doing all the training and he wasn't decked out in hard muscle.

Johnny spent his time sitting in a garden oasis reading and was still built like a marble statue. Like the statue of David in Florence. Or better. Well worth a whole city throwing a fit that he'd been secured into a museum safely and demanding a beautiful replica for them to look at, to gaze upon still.

He glanced up at Johnny saw the amusement in his eyes in the moonlight.

"Maybe in each of our fights I should've just taken off my shirt," Johnny said.

Daniel's face burned.

Would he have fought Johnny if when they went to fight on the beach if he'd not been wearing a shirt? If he'd seen all that muscle hiding

under that red leather jacket?

His mouth went dry.

Maybe.

Maybe he would've still rolled around in the sand with him, not realizing why he had to get closer, why he felt a need to touch the tough angry blonde.

A need to play with fire, to let it lick his fingertips until they burned, as long as he got to touch to his heart's content.

He buried his head against Johnny's chest.

"A dangerous idea."

Would Daniel have gone weak in the knees?

Or would he have pounced?

Both, probably both.

He might've still sucker-punched him though. Ruining any chance at that moment.

He listened to Johnny's steady heartbeat, his steady breathing.

He smelled like his soap, his shampoo, his aftershave. A combination that Daniel enjoyed.

He liked the way the muscle felt under his hand, his fingertips, his palm. He wondered what Johnny did that kept him in such good shape. He babysat and worked at an animal sanctuary and at the bonsai shop. He'd seen Johnny return from the garden shop with soil slung over his shoulder a couple times a week.

Was that it? It couldn't be.

He wanted to figure out all of Johnny's secrets. How he worked. He wanted to stop by the animal sanctuary and see him with the animals. See him with the kids he babysat.

He yawned. Let his eyes shut, just for a moment, running his hands over Johnny's muscles. After. After it was all over he'd enjoy it more. In the light of their new apartment. On the couch, they'd picked out. In the kitchen. Their bed, maybe in the shower or bath, heck why not

both?

The arm around him felt comforting, safe, the hand in his hair was soothing.

The panicked rhythm of his heart had slowed.

He breathed.

Daniel woke up surprised he'd fallen asleep.

He looked at Johnny, muscles no longer taunt but relaxed as he held him in his sleep.

Daniel didn't want to move. Gently poking around at Johnny at the relaxed muscle that gave way under his fingertips.

He didn't need another trophy.

He had something better.

He had this and he didn't want to go.

He didn't want to put on his gi, the black belt from Sato and Chozen, his hachimaki from Mr. Miyagi.

He didn't want to go to the All-Valley.

He wanted to stay in Johnny's arms, safe and secure.

He kissed the skin near his face, Johnny's sternum.

One more hurdle.

One more fight and then...then he *hoped* he'd be free. Free to start his life.

Johnny had been collecting trade schools and college pamphlets with good business programs, things and places he could study, where he could apprentice. He just hadn't had the mental space to look at them yet.

But he could kiss him. He wanted that. To put it off a little longer, so he pushed himself up, wiggling a little out of the loose grip, and kissed Johnny's forehead, his nose, his cheeks, waiting for those blue

eyes to bat open, to fall upon him, to take him in. And then there he was, waking up, stretching underneath him, shifting with a yawn and the arms wrapping around him again, finding his waist once more.

Daniel leaned down and kissed him.

Johnny kissed him back sleepily, waking up more.

He pulled away and grinned when Johnny's blue eyes were looking up at him.

He cupped the side of Johnny's face, he hadn't thought he'd sleep through the night. Figured he'd be too wired until it was over and then he'd either be in the hospital or he'd pass out. But even though his nerves were starting to rev up again there was something about Johnny holding him close that had helped. That reminder that Terry Silver and John Kreese wouldn't get all that they wanted. Not without a fight and that Johnny wouldn't take it. Not any more. And neither would Daniel. And he remembered that Johnny had his own plan. Something to help.

"Can I get a hint?" Daniel asked.

"About what?" Johnny asked letting his head fall heavily back on the pillow like he was disappointed that Daniel had moved too far away to kiss.

"Your plan."

"No."

"Why not?"

"You've got enough on your mind, enough on your plate. You should focus."

Daniel lowered himself down, lips barely brushing against Johnny's. "I know what I want to focus on."

Pink blossomed, spread, slowly reddened and Daniel grinned.

"There are better things to focus on don't you think? So why don't you add something else for me to focus on," Daniel added.

"Sneaky," Johnny muttered. "No, but just, I don't know, you might not like it, so like just don't get mad."

Mad? What could Johnny do to make him mad?

"See? This is why I didn't want to say anything, I can see the gears working."

Johnny looked bummed like he'd been tricked into sharing his last cookie with someone.

Daniel leaned down and kissed him. He hadn't had a lot of focus, a lot of energy, but maybe he could get something going, quick, simple, and absolutely so pleasant that it'd hopefully get Daniel through, release some of the tension in his shoulders until he got home again with Johnny.

The first time Daniel had walked into the All-Valley he'd been overwhelmed.

Neither he nor Mr. Miyagi knew how it worked.

They didn't understand the point system.

Nothing.

He'd thought Mr. Miyagi had known, it'd been his idea after all. Had been so shocked he hadn't known. That Ali had to fill them in on everything.

He hadn't even had a black belt.

Now as he stood next to Mr. Miyagi watching the matches he cringed. Barnes was giving him a preview. The way he was brutalizing his opponents. He heard the ref give a warning, no more groin shots.

Daniel had plans he wanted to accomplish that night, but it sounded like if Barnes got his way he'd be sitting with an ice pack between his legs rather than anything else. Just like these other poor guys.

Maybe it'd be karma for that cheap shot he gave Chozen in Okinawa. But this was worse.

It kept happening.

Despite the ref's warnings, Silver and Kreese were laughing on the other side of the mat delighted in Mike Barnes's brutality. And they had the gull to be handing out stupid yellow t-shirts like it was a

professional sports game. Like anyone would want their stupid t-shirts.

They called Silver up to the stage to talk and Daniel felt his blood boil.

Everything he said was fake.

But the crowd was eating it up.

Just like the dumb t-shirts.

"I've always lived my life by the rule that if you get you give."

Bullshit.

Silver gave nothing.

He hoarded his own wealth.

The t-shirts he was giving out were to try and entice people to like him.

It was all a ploy.

The only get to give ratio was the fact Daniel had won last time and now Silver was getting revenge. Even though it didn't make sense because Daniel had won against Johnny. And not in a battle against Kreese. Hadn't even known Silver existed.

Daniel couldn't listen to it anymore, turning angrily to Mr. Miyagi.

"It's all lies Mr. Miyagi. All of it! He doesn't mean any of this."

"Hai Daniel-san," Mr. Miyagi said with a nod.

"Today it's time for me to give back," Silver's voice continued.

"Really Mr. Miyagi? *Now* he's going to give back? He looks like he's being the nice guy right but he's not. He's not."

"-Sensei Kreese-"

"I can't Mr. Miyagi. Great? He's not great. He lied. Said the guy was *dead*. He tried to kill Johnny. *Twice*. He shouldn't even be here. He should be banned for life. They all should."

Terry Silver stopped his prowling of the mat, with his microphone walking towards Daniel, eyes on him as he spoke.

"Honesty, Compassion, and fair play," Silver said with a grin.

It was all lies. Nothing he said was true.

He had a fake persona for the people in the audience, for those in the tournament, but Daniel knew now.

Daniel knew it was all lies, it was all fake and Silver wanted nothing more than to watch him squirm, to see him in pain.

Daniel didn't want to be there.

Couldn't believe people were cheering on the bastard.

The referee started to explain the new rules as he walked onto the mat across from Barnes.

Sudden death.

What the hell?

Three minutes of fighting and if it was a tie if there were no points then it'd be sudden death?

Where was he, Okinawa again?

Based on the laughter in Silver's eyes this was the point.

They were going to torture him for three minutes and then win.

He felt fear flood through his veins.

That was it wasn't it?

They were going to draw this out.

Take a point, lose a point.

Daniel ran out of the ring the first time Barnes came kicking after him.

The second time he tried to defend, lost a point, and then felt his heart sink.

Barne's would have to do something unsportsmanlike, and sure enough a kick to the groin sent him to the ground.

This was going to be hell. Three minutes of hell.

He'd have to be fast, faster than he was, but then he wasn't fast enough. Dodging as much as he could until Barnes got his next point and Daniel went down again.

He tried desperately to get a point but his fist barely grazed Barnes as he tumbled to the mat.

Daniel knew something was coming, that point had to disappear somehow. Sure enough, he hopped up and punched Daniel in the face.

When Daniel stood up Barnes was wild, chasing him off the mat and into enemy territory. Daniel didn't realize it until he slammed into Silver's chest

"And now the real pain begins Danny-boy"

He was laughing. Delighted. Having fun.

And he was right, it was grueling.

Barnes was going for hits, lots of hits that didn't count, that won him 0 points, that didn't move the needle or get him disqualified. Though it didn't make any sense why the ref wasn't calling it. Why no one was telling him to stop.

Barnes was drawing it out and Daniel was stumbling as he got back to his feet.

He fell to the mat again as sudden death was declared as Mr. Miyagi flew to his side calling out to him, shouting to reach through beyond the pain to be heard. Louder than Daniel had ever really heard Mr. Miyagi speak.

He told Mr. Miyagi he didn't want to be there, that he was scared, that they should just go home. He wanted to be back in bed with Johnny. Wished he hadn't left that day, hadn't ever gotten out of bed.

"Must not lose to fear!" Mr. Miyagi shouted.

"Yeah well, I'm afraid! I'm afraid of him alright?"

It felt like an understatement. Win or lose Barnes wouldn't leave him alone. Or Silver. And then someone would come after them. And then someone else. Johnny had been right he attracted danger, and it was always worse. He couldn't imagine the person coming after Silver. Whoever Daniel would have to deal with next. It made him feel sick.

"Hey! You stay focused. You train ever since summer. With friends. Work hard. Harder than ever before. You study with everyone. Work hard. Daniel-san you best karate still inside. Now time let out."

Daniel stared at Mr. Miyagi, still hugging his ribs, looking out into the crowd.

He'd waffled about wanting Johnny there. About wanting his mother there.

He knew it'd be bad. Had thought about telling them not to come. But there they were.

Johnny sitting next to the guys. His mother, Ms. Lawrence.

He spotted a girl with curly blonde hair, standing up in the stands, yelling at him to get up to kick that guy's ass.

Ali.

She looked pissed.

He nearly laughed and it hurt.

But she wasn't alone. A redhead was standing next to her. Shouting as well. He could barely hear it over the crowd.

"Kick that slimeballs ass, Daniel!"

Jessica Andrews.

He felt tears prick at his eyes.

She was supposed to be in Ohio.

What was she doing there?

Daniel's eyes turned back through the crowd finding Johnny's blue ones.

His jaw was set like he was struggling to stay seated. Like he wanted to get up and move.

He was sure if he looked close he'd see that the guys were holding Johnny back, keeping him down, in his seat.

Johnny was mouthing something.

Not yelling.

Not shouting.

He wouldn't.

But Daniel knew what he was saying, had studied this lips so much, watched him so closely that he could make out the words from across the room without needing to strain to hear him.

"You know what to do. You've got this."

He focused on it rather than Barnes who had thrown himself down on the mat to yell at him, trying to taunt him back up.

All Daniel had to do was fight.

Johnny had the rest of it covered.

Whatever the rest of it meant.

Daniel got up.

Johnny was right.

Mr. Miyagi was right.

It all fell into place.

He'd been trying to fight in a way that wasn't him.

He knew what to do.

He had to do what grounded him, what was the base of his karate.

Kata.

Barnes looked at him wide-eyed like he didn't understand what Daniel was doing.

Like it scared him.

Like Daniel knew more than he seemed, which he did.

He just had to wait.

Instead of rushing in, this time he'd let Barnes rush in. All he had to do was be patient. It was one point. Win or lose. Johnny would do

whatever was needed next. One point and even if he lost the ref would stop the fight. One hit and it'd be over. He'd made it that far. He just had to breathe and follow the well-worn movements he'd practiced for so long. To be the version of himself, to do the karate that he liked, that Silver had tried to cut out.

Barnes rushed in and it was so easy to see what to do. How to send him falling to the mat. Like in all those books, all the practice with Johnny and the guys, to use the momentum against him and send him to the ground. He got the point. A quick hit, like he almost didn't believe it. But he did it.

He bounced off the mat, holding his injured side and throwing his arm around Mr. Miyagi, pulling him into a hug.

He didn't care.

He knew it wasn't Mr. Miyagi's favorite, but he needed to hug the man.

Finally.

"The winner, defending his title Daniel LaRusso!" the announcer said and Daniel hobbled overtaking the trophy.

Barnes looked up at him and looked about ready to charge. Red and furious.

Daniel felt his heart jump into his throat until a shadow fell on him and Johnny stepped onto the mat in front of him.

"Stay back," Johnny said.

"So kind of you to step out of the crowd, you're next, we may have failed with Daniel, but with you-" Kreese said stepping up onto the mat. "And with all of our dojos-"

Johnny didn't move, didn't budge from where he stood in front of Daniel, blocking Barnes, standing in the way, ignoring Kreese, like he wasn't worried.

Daniel wanted to grab him, pull Johnny away, somewhere safer but instead Silver stepped in, laughing.

"Well Danny boy, so you won the tournament. But that doesn't mean you're rid of us. We'll still open Cobra Kai everywhere. You will know

no peace. You or your boyfriend. We will grind you and your sensei to dust."

"It's over Silver," Johnny said moving forward, towards them. Barnes moving back out of the way. "Checkmate."

"Checkmate?" Silver asked incredulously.

"You own a company called Dyantox, right? You may want to call and check in with your board and staff. I heard Dynatox is undergoing a very intense investigation that I think will have it tied up in litigation for...how long Jimmy?"

"Oh decades for sure," Jimmy said. "Until it's run out of funding for sure. What with all the allegations of illegal waste dumping overseas."

Silver looked startled for a mere second before recovering.

"I have dealt with that before, it's all hearsay, after all the DA and I-"

"Oh, I'm sure. But there's also the whole bribing of *that* DA, a Mr. Cole I believe? I think he's already given a statement about it. Dinners at your mansion I believe. But that's not all," Johnny said turning and holding out his hand to a man walking forward out of the crowd in a suit. "I would like to introduce you to a dear friend. He works with the United States government and our military contracts. He recently told them he wanted to expand stateside and was offered to set up anywhere at all that he wanted. The government told him, to make it easier to just pick an already established dojo and it could be his. For *pennies*. You would not believe which one he picked. Mr. Silver please meet Mr. Sato, the new owner of Cobra Kai and all of its properties, backed by the United States military."

"That's impossible," Silver said eyes wide.

"You can't do that you little-"

Daniel pulled on Johnny, trying to pull him back and out of the way of Kreese who was red with fury, fists raised, but Johnny stayed rooted in his spot. Before Kreese made it he fell to the ground hard, like all the control he had over himself was gone, like strings suddenly cut on a puppet.

"I guess you are Kreese. I heard you are a very bad teacher. No worry. I will be a much better replacement," Chozen said looking down at Kreese with a frown.

"There's something I'm forgetting," Johnny said thoughtfully. "Oh, right. Mr. Sato, and Chozen are from Okinawa. Their root karate is the same as Mr. Miyagi's. Which means *his* karate will continue to flourish in the Valley for a very very long time. Long after you both have been forgotten."

"How dare you. Do you have any clue who I am?" Silver asked stepping into Johnny's space, grabbing the front of his shirt.

"A sad old man with too much time on his hands that spent months stalking a 19-year-old?" Dutch asked throwing an arm around Daniel's shoulder.

"A man who broke into and entered the home of a decorated war veteran?" Tommy asked.

"A guy who hired a karate "bad boy" to terrorize and abuse a war veteran and his student? Who trashed their bonsai shop?" Bobby asked.

"A man who threw thousands of dollars to ignore his business and get revenge on an under 18 all valley karate champion for a tournament where you make no money and is only in the Valley?" Jimmy asked.

"A liar, a manipulator, and a man so focused on a petty project that he took his eyes off his defense and failed everything the dojo he owned taught," Johnny said. "But I suppose we should remind our ex sensei and the ex-owner of the creed they taught us, one final time since they seemed to have forgotten it."

"Strike first!"

"Strike hard!"

"No mercy!"

Daniel's ears rang from the shout the ex-cobras gave that echoed through the gymnasium.

"I will get my revenge," Silver hissed.

"You won't. You underestimated Daniel. You underestimated Mr. Miyagi. You underestimated me. You left yourself open and I just did what your dojo taught me," Johnny said.

"You stupid bastard. None of this will stick. You're just a stupid kid,

with stupid friends who will be hurt because of you. Because you're worthless, because-"

Chozen punched Kreese in the face.

"*Nephew*," Sato said with gentle admonishment.

"He talks too much," Chozen said shaking his hand. "That was me *trying* uncle."

Chozen stepped around Kreese and towards Silver, putting himself between Johnny and Silver.

"You, big guy, not get it yet? You lose. And look your escort arrived."

Silver glared at Chozen, then with worry at Kreese, before turning to see police officers arrive.

"What-?"

"Oh, I forgot to mention," Johnny said holding up a recorder. "When I came to get Daniel out of Cobra Kai, I reordered our whole conversation. The one where you admitted to everything, boasted about your plans, and of course the attempted murder. . It's been passed around. Everywhere. I gave it to the police. And my lawyers or well- my mother's lawyers have a copy for their cases. Your board was given it. The realtors. The board of the All-Valley. The lawyers suing Dyantox. Really I feel like it's a good piece of evidence for your character. You *and* Kreese."

"You-" Silver said turning, pale, trapped, searching.

He stormed, hands coming towards Johnny, reaching.

Daniel moved, sweeping Silver's leg out from under him, having gone unnoticed, Chozen on Silver's other side, pinching something.

He fell like a sack of bricks.

Johnny stepped back unphased, out of the way.

"You'll just dig yourself deeper. I don't recommend it," Johnny said.

Silver opened his mouth but Daniel didn't pay attention, focusing on Johnny until it was finally over.

Until long after they were hauled away.

Chapter End Notes

Fact about David in Florence was given to me by a tour guide. She told me that the people who lived in the city missed seeing his beauty every day after he was put into a museum that a replica had to be made to keep them happy. He was originally meant to be put on a roof but then was considered too pretty to put so far away from view so he was put outside in a plaza, but then brought inside a museum for safekeeping and it upset everyone to not see him anymore.

Squishy muscles flexed versus unflexed again, but hey I found a video explaining it so here's a link to a guy showing the difference: link

Worth More Than A Trophy or Tournament

Daniel was speechless.

It was fascinating to see.

Despite the pain, something Daniel brushed off when Johnny offered to bandage him up in the locker room, too much in a hurry to see their friends and to leave.

Daniel had seemed determined to just stare in surprise at everyone Johnny had gotten to come.

To watch the red and blue lights fade off into the distance with all his (their) tormenters lugged off.

He was holding onto Johnny's hand so damn tight, almost bone-crunching, but Johnny knew he must've felt untethered.

That high of winning after an awful time, awful **months**.

The relief of it being over.

Finally.

It'd been a lot of work but it'd gone smoothly. From minor details to larger ones.

He'd sat in with Mrs. Douglas and the committee after his initial confrontation with Terry Silver and had set the tape down on the desk, playing it for them, feeling sick to his stomach but gritting his teeth to sit through it.

Mrs. Douglas had looked at him in horror and they'd jumped to call the whole thing off.

Johnny had asked them to wait.

He made a special request because the whole thing was unfair.

Not just to Daniel but to all the karate students in the valley who'd been working hard all year long and who were going to be beaten by Barnes on his rampage to get to Daniel.

"What do you suggest Mr. Lawrence?"

"Make two first-place trophies," Johnny had said. "Give one to whoever wins the tournament, I bet it's Daniel. But then erase Barnes from the tournament and give the first second and third place to all those who fell behind Barnes."

"That's unusual."

"They deserve to be celebrated for all their hard work. After we leave, after Daniel wins, make the announcement. Daniel is 19, he doesn't really qualify and Barnes should be disqualified for bad sportsmanship."

"Shouldn't we just block Daniel from competing at the gate? Save him the...pain?"

"Barnes will still be in there tormenting your other competitors," Johnny said. "This way the façade continues, but those who aren't part of it still get rewarded and acknowledged for their hard work. Daniel plans to fight. Please let him. I also highly recommend you have medics on call in the audience."

"You think it'll be that bad?" Mrs. Douglas had whispered, voice tight.

Johnny tapped the new rules on the table. Pointing at "sudden death".

"Silver wouldn't have made this rule change if he didn't plan to use it."

"But the only way to do that is to spend three minutes without getting a point. It's practically impossible. You'd-you'd have to be *willingly* malicious."

"Exactly," Johnny said. "That's what they want."

"We should stop this," Mrs. Douglas said. "None of these kids should be put in danger."

"They **shouldn't**. **Daniel shouldn't**," Johnny agreed. "But if we don't catch him here, if that mask doesn't fall, then he can escape into the wind. Let me lay my trap and then he'll be gone. They'll all be gone."

They'd agreed, becoming his co-conspirators to catch a bigger fish. They'd do what they could to protect the tournament goers, to play pretend, be harsher refs, and keep Barnes in line as much as possible, but act like they didn't know that who Terry Silver was.

They didn't cash his check.

Mr. Miyagi had taken Johnny and Daniel fishing several times since they'd moved in.

In early grey dawns, a lesson on patience and waiting.

It had been as boring as Daniel had warned him.

But Johnny got it now as he set his trap, as he watched Silver move in, focused only on the bait.

He hated that he was using Daniel as bait but Daniel was going to do it no matter what Johnny said.

Silver was going to go after him even if Johnny scooped Daniel over his shoulder and ran, which he'd thought about nearly every night. Of just bundling Daniel up in the bedding of their bed and carrying him off to the Avanti and taking off into the night, somewhere out of Silver's reach.

But he'd learned with Sid, learned in Okinawa and returning home, to stop running.

To stand his ground.

He learned it from listening to his mom, the way that she'd turned, all fire and fury on Sid to protect what was hers, to take what she was owed, and then some.

Johnny knew he knew how to do that too. To stop running, to turn and face Kreese, to face Silver.

Somethings happened easily without him meaning for it to happen.

The snowball of telling everyone in their community to be on the watch for Silver and Barnes had spread without him needing to do anything.

As soon as the waitress had seen Barnes try to fight him, clearly the aggressor, it'd spread like a wildfire through the Valley.

The papers that Johnny had printed out at the fax and printing mom and pop shop were taken from his hands by their neighbors and through word of mouth carried on to their friends and families until it circled back.

The waitress came into their shop one afternoon to talk to Johnny. To tell him Silver wouldn't be able to open a shop anywhere in the Valley

without someone hearing about it, telling them and then Johnny.

He'd mentioned it to the realtor while out looking at apartments.

Talking about the creeps in Daniel's life who wouldn't leave him alone when she asked why security was such a big deal.

Maybe Johnny had put it a little higher on the list than normal people did. But he wouldn't look at an apartment unless there was a security guard somewhere on the property. One he could hand over a picture of Silver's face to or Barnes and say "if they show up call the police".

She'd gotten quiet as he talked, not telling her everything, just enough.

That he'd broken into their house and was tormenting them.

That the police hadn't done anything yet.

That they kept breaking into the shop.

"Johnny," she'd said so quietly.

She'd once said she'd had a son their age. And he could tell now that she was thinking about it.

About her kid trying to make it out on his own only for some rich bored guy to torment him every time he tried to get comfortable.

Breaking in.

Sending other people to harass him.

Threatening him.

She'd called Johnny back to her office a week later.

"I talked to the head of our department, and my friends and well... rivals, I guess at other agencies," she said. "You said you had a flyer with this guy's face on it?"

Johnny had one for Silver, had a picture of Kreese he'd used to show the police as well, and the stupid ad in the karate magazine with Barnes.

He passed all three to her.

He didn't have any photos of Snake or Dennis, but he'd been asking around, looking for security cameras in their neighborhood.

The waitress at the restaurant had one.

She'd pulled the fight for him.

It was grainy.

Not great quality.

But it was good enough.

He passed that over as well.

She smiled.

"Don't worry, they've been blacklisted. They won't be able to buy a property in LA. No one will sell to him. And at the rate the conversation is going, it might be all of California. Except maybe the desert."

She'd patted his hand. Reassuring.

He'd also given all of it over to Jimmy.

Jimmy was kind of acting like it was his birthday. Which amused Johnny because they'd celebrated his birthday in style months ago. But as Johnny brought him more and more evidence he just grinned at Johnny.

Like he'd brought Jimmy the moon or something.

He knew Jimmy would make even more copies.

He was organizing multiple cases.

Running between classes and the company he was interning with.

Johnny got to meet the guy, one of his godfathers he supposed who was working on the case for his mother.

He'd shaken Johnny's hand and then clapped his shoulder telling him not to worry they'd get to work and legally there'd be nothing Silver or Kreese could do.

Johnny had an idea though, from that new rule in the All-Valley.

Maybe it was dangerous.

Maybe it was a bad idea.

"Any way we can drag it out? Painfully as possible? Waste his money?" Johnny had asked.

"If we're fast we *get* his money or at least a lot of it."

"I don't want his money," Johnny said. "I want to **waste** it."

He'd laughed.

"You are your mother's son. In her case, I advised against it. But with this- I'll see what I can do."

Jimmy had grinned like Johnny had just recommended the most fun night of his life.

The part Johnny didn't think Daniel would like had been that morning after Daniel had left with Mr. Miyagi to prep, to do some last-minute meditation in some woods before driving to the tournament.

Johnny had driven to international arrivals and waited.

Dutch had called the night before to say that he'd picked up Jessica.

He'd sounded pretty happy to have seen her.

He'd driven her out for lunch to meet the guys before taking her to his mom's house.

Told Johnny they'd nearly cried.

Again.

It'd only been like a month, but they'd missed her.

Her aunt was out of town and it was a surprise.

It was a little awkward but his mom had made it sound like fun when he'd called to check in after talking to Dutch.

She'd taken Jessica out for a manicure with Mrs. LaRusso.

Whispered into the phone that the two of them were *very* chatty and

there was no getting a word in edgewise with the two of them together. But she sounded delighted by it.

"Haitai Johnny!"

Johnny had turned to the familiar voice. Hopping out of the Avanti as Kumiko came running.

He caught her in his arms.

"Look at you! Tokyo is treating you well!" Johnny had said.

She looked good.

Confident, happy.

She squeezed his biceps.

"And look at you in LA! I can't wait to see everything! Also neither can Chozen."

Johnny looked past her at Chozen who looked the opposite of Kumiko. Like he hadn't slept on the flight. Neck pillow still around his neck, dragging his suitcase, wrinkled and tired, also lugging Kumiko's suitcase by the looks of it.

His eyes met Johnny's and then he let out what Johnny could only assume as a whole bunch of curses in Japanese and Okinawan, turning away and fixing his hair.

Sato laughed ruffling his nephew's hair, messing it back up, before coming forward and shaking Johnny's hand.

"First long flight," Sato said. "Learning experience."

"He means that he got a first-class ticket for him and Yukie but economy for Chozen and I. Chozen couldn't sleep, was too curious about LA, asked me about a billion questions and finally fell asleep like an hour ago," Kumiko whispered.

"Johnny-san," Yukie said finally setting her luggage down and hugging him. "Too long."

He hugged her close.

It had been.

He carefully took her luggage when she pulled away and Kumiko's that she'd taken back from Chozen, then Sato's, and put it all in the trunk of the Avanti. Chozen fought him for the briefest moment before letting Johnny take his luggage as well, and add it to the trunk.

"Yours?" Sato asked running his hand over the side of the Avanti.

"Yes," Johnny said holding the door open to the passenger seat with a hand out to Yukie who smiled. "You should see Mr. Miyagi's collection of cars. He repairs a lot of classics."

"Can't wait," Yukie said.

Sato, Kumiko, and Chozen sat in the back. Chozen squished between the two.

He drove them the long way with the top down.

The tour.

He drove them along the coast for a bit so they could see the pier, the palm trees and he saw Kumiko's eyes wide pointing out the trees the ocean. Chozen's arms were crossed but he was looking, eyes wide.

Johnny drove them down the sunset strip, slowing down for the highlights, so they could get a good look at the Hollywood sign and rolled into Reseda, slowing outside Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees, pointing out the shop. He told them he'd show them around more after the tournament.

Sato made a sound of approval.

He thought about driving them through the Hills, taking them out for lunch. But instead, he took them home. To Mr. Miyagi's because he knew Mr. Miyagi had been up early to make them welcoming lunch boxes. Had flitted about the house, singing and humming, absolutely delighted to have them in his home.

Johnny parked the car and watched as they got out looking at all the cars.

Chozen pointed at Daniel's yellow Ford.

"What is that one?"

"That's Daniel's car," Johnny said. "A gift from Mr. Miyagi."

"It fits," Chozen said shaking his head.

Johnny popped the trunk as they took in the lot, in the cars, all glistening and well polished in the LA afternoon sun.

He grabbed their bags.

They hadn't been that heavy and he managed to get them all in one go, carrying them off to the house.

Chozen's surprisingly was the heaviest.

Mr. Miyagi had asked him to leave the door open.

The security off.

He was adamant that it'd be okay because of the tournament.

Johnny pushed the door open with his hip and was grateful for it. Grateful that he didn't have to set it all down until after he was inside.

They walked in after him, taking off their shoes and looking around.

They stopped to look at the medal of valor.

"What's this?" Kumiko asked.

"Mr. Miyagi's medal of valor, from the war," Johnny said setting the bags down off to the side.

Mr. Miyagi hadn't said whether they were staying or not.

Johnny thought he wanted them to stay.

But he also knew that maybe it'd be better if they stayed at a hotel.

Daniel and Chozen sitting at the same table for breakfast for at least a week seemed like it was a fight waiting to happen.

And he had a feeling the guys would also want to spend the night.

It'd be a full house.

He didn't think there'd be enough room.

He didn't know where Kumiko or Sato would sleep.

He just sort of assumed Mr. Miyagi would give his bed to Yukie or

they'd share. That Chozen would end up on the floor somewhere.

They hadn't built enough guest rooms for everyone.

Johnny started the tour. Showed them the kitchen, the bathroom, the garden, and the balance wheel that Sato stood and admired for a while.

Mr. Miyagi and Johnny had talked about the part of the plan that required Sato. He'd wanted permission before moving forward with it. To make sure it wouldn't hurt or disappoint Mr. Miyagi.

Johnny had asked while Daniel was out jogging with Dutch one early morning.

"I want to get rid of Cobra Kai for good."

Mr. Miyagi had hummed into his tea, waiting for Johnny to explain.

"I-I don't think Daniel would like it but I think someone has to uh...Tommy and Jimmy had a word for it....a phrase. Hostile takeover."

It sounded awful but Mr. Miyagi just waited. No judgment, no negative or approval.

"I was thinking that one of the guys, their family...or Mom could buy it, while they're distracted. But no one **wants** it. So I was instead thinking maybe...do you think Sato would be interested in expanding overseas?"

Mr. Miyagi had looked surprised only for a second before leaning back thoughtfully with his tea.

"He's got government contracts, right? Those are steel tight according to Jimmy. So if he asked, with his money and the government backing he could take all of them. The dojo we studied in, and all the others Silver threatened. It'd be a lot of work. But no one would learn Cobra Kai in the valley again."

Mr. Miyagi hummed.

"Yukie plan visit. Maybe bring Kumiko. Chozen say vacation time soon."

"You think it's okay Mr. Miyagi?" Johnny had asked hopefully.

"Hai Johnny-san. Good idea. You call Chozen or I call Sato?"

"I think it's best if you call Sato. I'll pick them up when they arrive at the airport."

Mr. Miyagi smiled, bright and warm.

Johnny watched Mr. Miyagi look out at his garden, and Johnny had a feeling he was thinking of dreams he hadn't let himself have.

Dreams beyond the bonsai shop.

Dreams of a home full of old friends, an old love.

Maybe Daniel would forgive him for inviting Chozen over the ocean if he saw Mr. Miyagi's face.

Other pieces slide into place right on time. Jessica came with the guys unnoticed by Daniel, slipping into the stands.

Ali came as well. They still hadn't talked much but Johnny was glad she came for Daniel.

He needed the guys to hold him back. Because every time Barnes's got a cheap shot in, a penalty, he started to get up and hands held him down, held him back.

He bit the inside of his cheek until he bled.

Bit his lip.

He was the one who'd asked the ref to go along with the charade, but he wanted to yell at the ref to put a stop to it.

He wanted to run down the stairs straight to Silver. Punch him in the face. To kick Barnes in the face. To spring the trap early.

Silver had taken his eye off the game, focused only on Daniel and forgotten that in the wings, waiting, were a bunch of angry boys from the Hills with their well-to-do parents, pissed to learn **what** they'd learned in Cobra Kai. Pissed to learn that they'd broken bones, bruised their ribs, done dangerous stunts all because Kreese had asked. And even more, to Johnny's surprise, they were pissed on his behalf as well.

He knew if he wanted to, if he asked, it could be so much worse. That if he explored the spider webs of his friend's family connections, the

money they could collectively spend, he could send everything down a darker path. He knew because sometimes when they talked about it, late at night he knew he'd heard the guys whisper about people they knew or had heard of. Ways people disappeared. But it seemed too easy.

Johnny wanted to tell Kreese. Wanted to tell Silver, the problem with taking boys and trying to mold them into monsters was that when you fucked up they'd bite and it'd hurt like hell.

If you went after anything they cared about **more** than themselves, then like dogs of hell they'd drag you back with them. Show exactly what they'd learned. And Johnny would not let them get away with those hits, those punches, the fact they'd dared touch Daniel. He didn't want it to be quick.

If Johnny had his way, and he was pretty sure he would get his way, they wouldn't see the sunlight outside of a yard for years to come. Until long after they were old and grey.

But hey, at least they'd have each other.

And that belief that this would work kept him from crushing the hand holding his while he waited. While he bounced his leg, while he listened to the girls yell to Daniel. To kick Barnes ass.

Knowing that Yukie, Kumiko, Sato, and Chozen were hidden elsewhere in the crowd so they'd go unnoticed.

While he watched Daniel roll on the mat.

He'd win.

Johnny knew that in his bones.

Because even when Daniel was scared, even when he was backed into a corner, it was always within the eleventh hour that he came back swinging.

It was always when you thought he'd go down and stay down that he came back up. And when those brown eyes met his he knew without a doubt. Knew he'd win. Knew that Daniel's own karate, the kata he'd done would take care of it.

Johnny looked over at Daniel as they reached a red light in the Avanti, on their way home after the tournament. Alone for a moment, to breathe on the way over, collect themselves.

"You did great," Johnny whispered. "It's over now."

Daniel blinked and turned back to him. "I can't believe-"

Johnny waited while he organized his words.

"Are they really gone?"

"Not completely, but all their exits have been cut off. They'll be let out for the lawsuits, and for those there are many. You would not believe the amount just for Dyantox that Gabriella dug up."

"What will happen if-"

"We'll win," Johnny said gently lifting the hand trying to crush his gingerly up to his lips.

It wasn't as bloody or bruised as Johnny's usually were after a tournament.

Daniel had only got the one shot in really, the only one that mattered.

"What do you want Mr. two-time champion?"

They both knew everyone would be at Mr. Miyagi's.

Everyone would be waiting for them. But sometimes, especially if it was a big one, like Johnny's last tournament, driving around helped.

Johnny had needed it, to be calm cool and collected.

Daniel shifted over.

"You."

"Daniel you got kicked and punched, everywhere. I don't think that's a good idea," Johnny said, knowing his ears were burning.

What sort of monster was Daniel?

Johnny had expected like ice cream, or a burger and fries, or hell a beer.

Though he was pretty sure his mom was making root beer floats as they spoke.

At least one of those shots had been to the groin.

Johnny thought at the very least he should pull over somewhere and get Daniel some ice.

"How about some ice instead?"

"The house is going to be full isn't it?" Daniel asked, he'd pulled his hand free and it was on Johnny's thigh as he leaned in close.

"Yeah. The guys will probably spend the night and I'm sure Yukie and Sato...to be honest, Mr. Miyagi said he'd figured that out but I haven't a clue where they're all sleeping."

There was a high with tournaments. A high after any sort of competition. But usually, the guys Johnny fought with didn't go after him like Barnes. Usually, Johnny was the one who knocked them down and after a cold shower, he usually found some sort of balance.

He'd just never realized what that was. They he was striving towards balance.

He'd known about the high but with Kreese barking orders, he never actually followed that ride.

What had Daniel even done the year before?

"Pull over somewhere," Daniel said.

It was a terrible idea.

An awful idea.

But Johnny pulled over near the beach.

One that was usually empty.

Horrible idea.

Daniel was going to hurt himself.

Just driving over a bump in the road would've hurt him.

Johnny had driven so carefully.

But Daniel was getting out of the Avanti, hand still holding his ribs, his abdomen like for a second the endorphins had made him forget he was in a pain and he was walking out on the beach, taking off his shoes.

Johnny followed after him as Daniel stood in the tide looking out at the dark water.

Johnny stuck his hands in his leather jacket pockets taking off his shoes and socks following closer.

Daniel cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted.

It was practically a scream.

Like he'd uncorked something, a shaken-up bottle of soda he'd forgotten about that had just rolled around in the bottom of the car.

So much for being sneaky.

But maybe he'd changed his mind.

He turned back to Johnny.

"I did it."

"Yeah, you did."

"I beat him."

"Of course you did."

"I won."

"Two-time champion."

Daniel reached out and grabbed Johnny's jacket and pulled him towards him, into the water.

Daniel pushed himself up kissing Johnny.

"Do you know what got me through everything?"

"Your stubbornness? Inner bonsai strength?"

Daniel laughed softly.

"I gave up on myself. But *you* never did. Mr. Miyagi never did. The

guys never gave up on me. Jessica never gave up on me. I- I didn't want to get out of bed to go for those runs, but Dutch would come, even after Jessica left and he'd drag me out of bed. All I wanted to do was stay there with you. But he got me going, got me moving, never left my side, just like Jessica didn't when she was here. And I can't believe she's here again. When did she get into town?"

"Couple of days ago. She's been staying with my mom."

Daniel shook his head with a soft laugh.

"The guys came every weekend. I called them at school you know. Sometimes. And they listened. Even though they were busy with school. They didn't rush me off the phone. Didn't say *I gotta study Daniel*. They listened. I'm sure I tanked their study time. But sparring with them, with you, it helped. I wavered. I thought I'd fall apart. I was scared when I realized what Barnes was doing. What Silver told me. That it was for sport. The whole thing was entertaining to him. To *them*. But then I listened to Mr. Miyagi. And I looked in the crowd. And I wasn't alone. Not anymore. Not like I was. And that is all you."

"It isn't. Everyone showed up because they care."

"No Johnny Lawrence. I'd have let people go. You and your ex-cobras show up and didn't stop showing up. There's no escape from them. None of you will let me fall, you won't let me fail, and-"

There were tears in Daniel's eyes.

"I'm grateful for it. For Ma being here, for Jessica being in the audience. That hug from Kumiko afterward. Hell, it was kind of cool seeing Chozen."

"I'm shocked. I thought you hated Chozen."

"I do not hate Chozen. I just, you know what? He's better than Barnes, any day."

Johnny laughed gently cupping Daniel's face in his hands.

"You are amazing you know that?"

"I am not."

"You are. Everyone always tries to stack the deck against you and even when you're scared, even when you want to throw away the towel and

run away you find that strength and you get up and you win. Every single time."

"Johnny."

"If I was a betting man I'd bet on Daniel LaRusso every single time."

"Well, you have to."

"I have to?" Johnny asked amused.

"Because you love me, of course, you have to."

Johnny laughed. "You are right. I do love you. Which is why I really think I should get you some ice or that green stuff from Mr. Miyagi."

"Not yet," Daniel said.

"Stubborn."

"Isn't that a quality of mine you *just* complimented?" Daniel asked pressing close.

"You're hurt."

"And I can think of a few things that can distract from the pain."

Johnny kissed him gently.

"Like what?"

Why'd he ask?

He should stop asking questions like that. Because Daniel always told him. And it always made his brain short circuit. But he followed Daniel down the beach anyway, grabbing their shoes, walking along with the tide towards the pier, to the space under it, heart pounding so loudly that he was sure Daniel could hear it. The frantic beat.

He sat down in the sand, gently helping Daniel down, wondering if he'd be okay, watching him for any burst of pain. But he was riding that high again.

It'd hit later.

It'd hit and it would all drop out from under him.

The pain, the bruises from the punches and kicks.

Daniel wasn't moving carefully. Like he couldn't feel it. Was too distracted.

Johnny hadn't even taken off his shirt. Which had worked, the night before when Daniel hadn't been able to sleep.

"You know what's a better prize than that trophy?" Daniel asked looking down at him, eyes looking impossibly dark. Nearly molten.

"Knowing you kicked ass?" Johnny asked.

Daniel laughed, kissing his neck. "Your heart is the best thing I ever won."

Johnny didn't know what to say. Stunned. He'd half expected something dirtier, from the track Daniel was on.

"Hey," Daniel said kissing him gently, settling down into the sand next to him.

His hand was brushing something wet from Johnny's face.

Tears.

Daniel smiled warmly at him like it wasn't a problem. Like those tears were fine, that the lump in his throat was okay, that there was time.

That was part of it. Everyone always told Johnny to hurry. To be better *yesterday*. To jump and they expected it as soon as the first syllable left their lips. But Daniel always waited. Or slowed down when Johnny needed it. Always turned around to look for him, always came back and got him, kept him by his side. Chased after him when he headed off on his own.

He didn't think of himself as a prize, and would, if he could get around the lump in his throat, tell Daniel that his heart didn't have to be won. That he'd given it to Daniel as soon as he'd realized how he felt.

His friends had helped, but somewhere along the way because of Kreese, because of Sid, even though everything along the way had helped, he didn't have much self-worth.

Not when it came to comparing himself to winning a tournament.

A tournament that Kreese had tried to kill him over.

To have Daniel say he was worth more than that, even though he knew that on some level, to hear it, to hear he was worth more than a plastic trophy, it was something he'd been waiting to hear but hadn't realized it.

He'd been told that second place was good.

That he'd done a good job.

But no one else had told him he was worth more than the tournaments.

That he was a worthier prize, worth more than that event.

He'd based all of his worth on it for so long.

Kreese had based all his worth on it. So had Sid.

He wrapped his arms around Daniel.

"Oh Johnny," Daniel said softly, gently rubbing his back. "You are, really you are. Worth more than any stupid prize from a tournament. Worth more than first-place trophies. To me, the trophies are just nice. Proof that I overcame hardship. Markers that each hardship is done. Like the end. But I don't have one for Okinawa. This last one is kind of tainted, haunted by Silver and Barnes in a way that its shiny little plastic gold man can never recover from. I wondered why you didn't set your trophies out. Why you kept them in a box in the back of your closet. I didn't get it. But now I do. I kind of don't want to see it. Which is why I gave it to Ma. I get why because Kreese tainted all of them, didn't he? Every win, even the ones you were proud of. The thing I'm excited about isn't that trophy but the fact that in about a week or so I get to move into a nice new apartment where everything is **ours**, where I get to finally have the time and the mental space to look over all that stuff to study mechanical engineering or at least pick something car related, where I'll have the mental focus to pay attention to you rather than just holding onto you for dear life. I look forward to sleeping through the night. Or working my way there again. I know it'll be okay because I have you because I have Mr. Miyagi because I have the guys. Hell, you made sure Ma was here. I'm looking forward to the future. I didn't think I would, but I am Johnny. Because it's got you in it."

Johnny thought he was holding on a little too tightly.

He should've been gentler.

He'd seen how many hits Daniel had taken. But it took a lot of effort to pull away to sit up again.

He lifted his hand to scrub at his eyes but Daniel beat him to it, fingers brushing tears aside.

"'m sorry."

"What for?" Daniel asked.

"I'm supposed to be celebrating you, your win. Not crying."

"Hey, it's been a lot. Not just for me. You think I didn't notice that before you'd come to bed that you'd check every nook and cranny of Mr. Miyagi's place? Made sure the doors and windows were locked? That the alarm was on? Everything you did to make sure Silver and Kreese and their karate minions were gone? I'm sure it's been just as emotionally draining, exhausting."

Johnny nodded. "I'm glad Chozen knocked me out before your fight with him."

"Yeah, why's that?"

"Watching you fight alone is hell."

Daniel laughed softly. "Upset you weren't on the mat? Missed it? Wished you'd signed up?"

"No. But I wanted to punch that bastard in his stupid face."

"Just think of how well you're going to sleep tonight."

"You do realize all the guys are going to be in our room tonight right?" Johnny asked with a soft laugh.

"I know I'm going to pass out, no snoring or guys joining our bed will keep me up, but you- maybe I can do something to help with that hmm?" Daniel asked his lips on Johnny's neck.

Johnny didn't know what to do, where wasn't Daniel bruised? He chose to run his fingers ever so gently on Daniel's back, a ghost of a touch because he knew he'd been kicked there, punched. Just not where or how big of a space it was. Daniel would be black and blue come morning. But he wasn't going to let it stop him though, not from

following Johnny back down into the sand as if he didn't care that they were going to get sand everywhere.

He supposed it was because he wasn't actually in the sand, Johnny was.

But it was easy to ignore for the moment, easy to be distracted by the sound of the tide and kissing Daniel, warm and whole, and in the dark under the pier all the bruises were invisible and he could just touch him, solid, steady and safe.

Finally safe.

Peace

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Can I drive the Avanti?" Daniel asked.

"What? No," Johnny said.

"Think **you** can drive?"

"Of course!"

"I've been trying to get you up for ten minutes. You look like you want to live in the sand for the rest of your life."

"Whose fault is that?"

"I think you should let me drive the Avanti."

"You know about maybe a half hour or so ago I was thinking about how much I loved that you don't rush me. I forgot that you do this."

"I'm don't rush you-"

Johnny laughed sitting up and getting his clothes. "You do, camping and this."

"They're both outside! I don't want you to get sick! I mean if you want to just lay around nude everywhere, I'd-"

"You're thinking about it."

"I am! We're about to have our own apartment and well..."

"We have friends who will not pay attention to a sock on the door Daniel."

"Friends who've come from Okinawa, Tokyo, and Colombus Ohio to see us."

"One day I'm going to do this to *you*," Johnny said. "See how you like being rushed to get dressed and moving."

"I look forward to it."

"No whining, you owe me for this."

Daniel burst out laughing.

"Fine, one I O U for cuddling. If you let me drive the Avanti you know you could just recover from the passenger seat."

"You'd still be rushing me over to the car."

"Well, I thought you'd get pissed if we tried to do it in the Avanti...oh, oh! What's that look? Is the Avanti not off the table?"

Johnny's head was down, looking through the sand for his socks, changing the topic with a little mumble. "You sure you weren't a boy scout?"

"No, I'm just always prepared."

He was a bit distracted, thinking about how much car sex opened up their options.

"Boy scout."

"Come on up you go."

"I'm up I'm up."

Daniel nearly laughed, couldn't stop smiling as Johnny dumped sand out of his shoes and put them back on. He knew he should fix Johnny's shirt. Knew he should help fix his hair. Make him a little less obvious. But he liked it a little too much. Seeing Johnny a mess. Knowing he'd done that. Caused it.

He dusted sand off of Johnny's back, walking with him back up to the Avanti. It wasn't what he'd wanted to do on the beach exactly, but he had to admit that everything, just like Johnny had said, hurt. But they'd have time to try again, to make up for it. And it'd still been fun. Always was.

Johnny fished around in his pockets for his keys and started up the Avanti.

"Anything else you want?"

Daniel settled into the passenger seat, knowing he was grinning like a Cheshire cat, pleased as punch. Johnny's collar was crooked. He'd messed up his buttons, fumbling in the dark.

"Nope."

"They're going to think we fucking died," Johnny said looking at the time with a sigh.

"I doubt that," Daniel said, dusting some sand out of Johnny's hair.

"Hey, can you wait till we get to Mr. Miyagi's? I'm going to have to vacuum the seats."

"I figure you'll have to vacuum them anyway," Daniel said letting his hand fall down to Johnny's thigh. "Maybe I'll put a towel in here. Oh, wait there's one in the trunk still right? Well, that's going to make clean up easier next time."

Johnny's hand went over his and pushed it away, down towards his knee. "You're a damn incubus."

"And that would be?" Daniel asked amused, sliding his hand back up.

"Type of demon."

"A specific type?" Daniel asked as Johnny pushed his hand back down.

"Yes, and I'm pretty sure you know the type, I'd like to get us home in one piece."

"We've got to work on your multitasking."

"And maybe your beliefs in how many times I can go so quickly after one another after you already tried that on the beach. Let's not play that game while I'm driving. I'm pretty sure if you tried right now I'd faint. And then we'd die. So let's wait."

"Like an hour? Like when you go swimming?"

Johnny sighed and Daniel laughed, he couldn't help himself. He felt as light as air. The bruises, the pain wasn't bothering him. A weight had been removed from his chest. The stress, the worry, it was all gone or at least leaving and the pressure was subsiding.

Mr. Miyagi's house was full. Full of cars in the lot. Full of sound.

Daniel could hear it from where they parked.

The voices of people he loved talking on the other end of the doorway.

He grabbed Johnny before he headed in, dusting more sand out of his hair, fixing his shirt. He couldn't let Johnny go in like that.

Daniel hadn't expected Chozen to come barreling towards them followed by the guys with pure mischief in their eyes as soon as they opened the door.

Daniel was not ready for that. Whatever the hell they'd done.

"Have you really slept with all of them?" Chozen asked.

The question was directed at both of them.

Daniel blinked and glanced at Johnny.

He looked confused.

Then at the guys.

Bastards.

Evil bastards.

"They've spent the night for like the last five years," Johnny said.

"In your bed?"

"Yeah."

"And in Daniel's bed?"

"Yeah."

Daniel wanted to cover Johnny's mouth.

He didn't get the misunderstanding.

The bit lost in translation.

He was probably thrown because he hadn't been expecting it.

Still a little dazed from endorphins. Could you be dazed by endorphins? Maybe he shouldn't have rushed Johnny.

This wasn't going to go well and it was going to become Daniel's worst

nightmare if the guys didn't fix it immediately.

Daniel tried to think of something to say.

Anything to curb the conversation.

Chozen looked stunned, stepping forward like he was about to issue a challenge.

"Then pick me tonight."

Oh god.

Fucking bastards.

He was going to kill them.

Did they not know how much work Daniel had done trying to keep Chozen at bay? And then as soon as Chozen landed on their shore the guys not only decided to fuck with him but didn't understand the repercussions.

Johnny looked confused.

Oh no.

Oh no no no.

"I never get to pick."

Chozen looked stunned, turning to the guys like he was about to start a fight. Defend some hypothetical honor of Johnny's.

"Chozen," Daniel said.

Chozen whirled back.

"You *let* this happen?"

"It's not what you think," Daniel said.

"They do rock paper scissors I think," Johnny said.

"Johnny-san," Chozen said softly. "You shouldn't- do you need help?"

He sounded worried. Did he think-

Johnny was **fine**.

If anyone needed rescuing from the antics of those fools who could barely stop themselves from bursting out in giggles then it was Daniel. He's the one who they always interrupted. They're the ones who always-

"How long?" Chozen asked.

Someone else put an end to all of it.

Daniel wanted a vacation.

Johnny tilted his head thoughtfully, doing the math.

Everything in Chozen's stance was uneasy.

"Five years?" Johnny asked. "Or would it be six now?"

He was asking the guys. Like he couldn't remember when.

"Does the first sleepover at my house count?" Bobby asked.

"I slept on the floor."

"Everyone but Bobby slept on the floor," Jimmy said with a shrug.

"I don't think that one counts," Tommy said.

Chozen looked absolutely horrified, which once upon a time seemed like fun. But Daniel knew the thread he was following. And they didn't know if they pulled that thread too much Chozen was going to break and punch them.

Defend Johnny's honor over a joke.

Hell Daniel wouldn't even blame him.

"You let this happen? You're fine with it?"

He was asking Daniel and Daniel swallowed hard.

"Johnny, could you get me some ice?"

Johnny looked at him before nodding and heading off.

"If I knew-" Chozen said, angry, hands curled into fists.

"Chozen, look at their faces," Daniel said.

Chozen turned with a frown.

"They're being dicks. Exploiting language. They don't fuck Johnny."

"Oh, shit."

"That's the disappointed face."

"He's pissed."

"Dude, it was just a fun game. Why are you ruining our fun?"

"Because Chozen's likely to punch you in the face if you wind him up too much. And this isn't funny. No Chozen. They just sleep **next** to us. Because they're pests. Think of it as a bunch of annoying brothers. Johnny is not being hurt or in trouble. Do you know how long it took to even-" Daniel sighed, frustrated. "They platonically share the bed and have ever since they met Johnny as like guards to try and catch Sid, Johnny's stepfather being an abusive asshole to him. And now it's a habit. A habit that means sometimes when they're over instead of **just** having Johnny sleeping next to me there's one or more of these dorks also in my bed. Or wherever we're sleeping. Somehow once we managed to barely fit all six of us into one bed. I've accepted that this is my life because they're his friends. And his oldest friends. Yeah, **oldest** Chozen. Those six years are it. He didn't have friends before these idiots. So they're precious even if they can be bastards. And they're my friends too, even if moments like this I start to question it. And sometimes, like when Barnes and Silver were shits, it was comforting having them in the room. It felt safer. So it's not what you think, but we're not changing or stopping it okay? I just need a bigger bed."

Chozen turned to look at them, fists uncurling, but not at ease yet.

"It doesn't make sense."

"What doesn't?" Daniel asked preparing himself for a headache.

He just wanted to get past this, stop to see his mom, to say hello to everyone.

Not be stuck in what was the guys hazing Chozen.

Did he deserve it yes?

This particular vein? No.

It would've been worse if Johnny had put two and two together.

"Why them?"

"*Hey*," Dutch said.

Something cold pressed gently against the side of Daniel's face and he looked up at Johnny.

"I trust them," Johnny said.

Chozen turned to him. "But they lie."

Johnny studied the guys curiously like he was trying to figure out what they'd done this time.

"I remember someone else **I** accused of lying who said they didn't actually lie but **misled**."

Chozen looked away from Johnny's gaze.

"They've had my back when I've been wrong, when I've been right, and they've helped me up and to keep going more times than I can count. Whenever I thought of giving up they wouldn't let me. They stuck by me even when I didn't think they would. They're irreplaceable. Even if they can be a pain sometimes. They're family. But they're tricksters, so be careful Chozen. Don't trust them until you get to know them better. But don't be mad at them. They've heard all about Okinawa and are probably trying to bother you because of everything. But know it's not *totally* malicious. They're just trying to rile you up. Be careful around the girls they might as well. Who knows what they've heard from Daniel."

Chozen looked a little stunned turning to Daniel, all the fight gone.

"You should eat something, I think they ordered pizza," Johnny said.

He was studying Daniel's face, only glanced at Chozen for a moment, before going back to looking at him full of concern.

"I'm okay," Daniel said softly.

"You haven't looked in a mirror," Johnny said softly. "We're going to have to make a big batch of that green goop."

"Well it does hurt a little," Daniel said softly.

"Yeah?" Johnny asked, kissing him softly. "How can I help?"

"Johnny, why are you covered in sand?" Bobby asked with a laugh.

Daniel heard the clap of Bobby's hand on Johnny's back.

He watched Johnny pull away red.

Dutch burst out laughing.

"Daniel, do you have no restraint? Even when your hurt?"

"I won, thank you very much," Daniel said sourly, holding onto Johnny before he could run away.

"Congratulations," Tommy said warmly.

"Thank you," Daniel said.

"Let's get you sitting somewhere so I can get to work," Johnny said.

"Because you didn't do enough work on the beach?" Jimmy teased.

"I hate you all."

"We love you too."

Daniel sat down at Mr. Miyagi's table where pizzas were set out and he grabbed a slice. The sick nervous feeling he'd had before the tournament had kept him from eating lunch and now that he was sitting near a pizza he was starving.

Johnny left his side to go get the first aid kit as the guys sat around, grabbing Chozen's arm to pull him down to join them.

"They are like Kumiko," he said sourly.

Daniel frowned.

Those four boys were **nothing** like Kumiko.

She was sweet and kind and, well they could be.

But he didn't think that was what Chozen was getting at.

"How so?"

"Kumiko lied. Told me Miyagi sensei would pick us up," Chozen said

sourly, picking up a slice of the pizza. "Always teasing. Can't trust her."

"Who picked you up?" Bobby asked.

"Johnny did."

"Kumiko is for sure trustworthy!"

"How do you even know that? You've never met her before tonight."

"We talked on the phone."

"And you can just tell from a phone call if someone is trustworthy?"

"Chozen I think that's just teasing."

Chozen frowned into his drink when Johnny came back sitting down next to Daniel.

"Oh, not the green goop right *now*. That stuff smells Johnny, you *know* it smells."

Daniel knew it had been what Johnny was going for, but he'd kind of hoped for something different. Not to get gooped up in front of Chozen of all people. Everything was starting to balance and he didn't want it to dip on his end.

"You're black and blue, you want to be stiff and in pain once your high crashes?" Johnny asked with a frown. "At least let me get some of it."

"This is supposed to be a winning party. Celebration. Not a first aid tent. Plus, plus the guys are eating right?" Daniel asked waving at the guys desperately.

"I don't care."

"Yeah fix away Johnny."

"Already been on the other end of the goop."

"If we drink enough maybe we'll become numb to the smell."

"Oh that's a great idea, let me get more beer."

"Chozen you want another beer?"

"I-"

Chozen's eyes met Daniel's, a curious plea of *do I trust a beer from these guys or worry they're going to spit in it or something worse.*

Daniel's eyes flicked to Tommy who'd asked. There wasn't that trickster look in his eyes, just a regular question.

He nodded.

"Hai," Chozen said.

Tommy nodded and headed off to get more beers while Johnny lifted up Daniel's shirt.

Daniel flushed red.

Did Johnny not realize how crowded the house was?

Everyone would notice eventually. Sure sometimes he'd gotten patched up in front of his mom and the guys, but everyone together?

Daniel heard the sharp intake of breath from Johnny, a slight hiss. Like he had been the one hurt.

He felt lips on the back of his head then heard the sound of that awful jar of green goop being opened.

If he never had to see or use that goop again in his life he'd appreciate it.

No more guys who wanted to beat him up. But he had a feeling Johnny would ask someone for a jar of it and it'd be in their cabinet forever. For whenever, one of them got hurt.

"Damn," Bobby whispered. "It looked bad, but it is pretty bad. Almost like that first year when you tried to do that tournament in San Diego."

"Oh right, you came back all beaten up," Jimmy said shaking his head.

"Well that's because Kreese signed him up above his age and weight class," Dutch said with a sour frown. "So of course he got the shit beaten out of him."

"Why?" Chozen whispered, looking at them eyes wide.

"Let me go find that photo," Jimmy said getting up. "So you've got a better idea."

"Jimmy no need," Johnny said, a twinge of embarrassment.

Daniel smiled, it was probably pre-growth spurt Johnny. Tiny.

Going up against high schoolers, bigger kids.

His frown faltered.

"Kreese said he needed to learn how to take on guys bigger than him. Even though the older kids in our dojo were use to Kreese's methods they still held back a little against us, so taking him to a different city to fight bigger kids who thought he was just scrawny and their age, but at their level," Bobby began.

"Kreese also lied about what belt he had."

"Yeah snuck Johnny into a black belt tournament for high schoolers while he was middle schooler with an orange belt."

Daniel whirled on them eyes wide. Belts hadn't made sense to him before, not fully, but after reading all of the books on karate in preparation he knew how big of a gap there was between the two. He continued to shift, turning to look at Johnny.

"Was that your first tournament?" Daniel asked voice barely a whisper.

"I think it was my second," Johnny said.

"Right we all did one that was for our class weight and Johnny did really well and was super proud of all his hard work, and Kreese being Kreese-" Jimmy said returning and sitting down with that first magazine out of Daniel's desk.

Which meant he knew.

Which meant they all knew.

"That's Johnny?" Chozen whispered.

"Yup," Tommy said passing him a beer and joining him. "Five, oh no, six years ago."

"We're talking about that first San Diego tournament," Dutch said.

"Oh, the one where Kreese said "It's easy to be the biggest fish in a small pond, but you need to be the biggest fish even in a big pond," and then sent him into the ring to get slaughtered?" Tommy asked.

"Yeah that one," Jimmy said with a sigh.

"I don't know how Kreese got away with it, Johnny was clearly not in high school or the right belt."

"He bribed the guy at the front desk," Johnny said bandaging up Daniel's back and looking for more bruises he could get at easily. "And the refs."

"Seriously?" Jimmy asked. "Johnny, why didn't you say anything? I got to add that to the lawsuit!"

Johnny shrugged. "I forgot about it."

"You forgot about it?" Bobby asked. "You were-"

"I know," Johnny said gently. "But there was so much like that, it all blurs together."

"Johnny," Daniel said softly.

"Why did you not kill him?" Chozen asked. "You were baby baby." He pointed towards the picture.

"Okay I take it back, I like him," Dutch said with a grin.

"It's illegal," Daniel stressed.

"What if *I* kill him?"

Johnny wiped the green goop off of his hand and reached across the table patting Chozen's wrist.

Daniel watched Chozen stiffen at the contact, eyes a little wide, a little shocked. Off-balance.

"He's not worth it, this is better."

"How's it better?" Chozen asked stiffly, anger curling him forward.

"Death is quick. No one would know *why*. He'd be *missed* and *mourned*. But this way everything awful and terrible, everything he'd ever done will be dragged out into the sunlight for everyone to see and know

and he won't be able to hide behind fake good intentions," Johnny said. "Neither he nor Silver can hide behind the fake personas they put on for the public, just like Sid."

"Damn," Dutch said quietly.

"Just like his mom," Tommy whispered.

"If I could make it worse I would," Johnny said, voice dark gently bandaging a bruise on Daniel's arm. "Because for this I will never forgive them."

"Johnny I'm fine," Daniel said, looking back at him.

"You couldn't sleep. You always sleep. You couldn't because of those bastards."

"Well you *never* slept," Daniel said. "Because of Sid and Kreese."

"I know," Johnny said softly.

"That wasn't good either, even, even if you were *used* to it. It wasn't okay. Neither was anything that happened." Daniel said stiffly. "I get Chozen's sentiment."

Chozen looked at him surprised.

"And yours," Daniel said gently patting Johnny on the shoulder.

"Just because I went through it, I know...I'm learning it's not good. But I also never wanted anyone else to go through that feeling. Especially you," Johnny said softly.

Daniel patted his knee gently. "That is why what I want to do right now is celebrate. Eat some of this pizza, whatever it is Bobby brought-"

"I brought a lot. My parents baked you a cake. I got these little cookies I made as a test. My parents wanted to come but they've got all this stuff to do. We're opening another store. But they show their regret in like tarts, bars, and other stuff. I don't even know what all they sent. Let me go get it."

"Mom's also making floats," Johnny whispered.

"If there's ever a day for a sugar crash today is it. Bring it," Daniel said with a grin.

He watched Johnny sigh, closing the green goop lid but pressing the ice pack adamantly into his hand, blue eyes flicking pointedly down, before getting up. "I'll get us floats." He kissed the side of Daniel's head, hand gently on his shoulder.

Daniel sighed, taking the ice pack and gingerly putting it in his lap.

Stupid Barnes and his stupid friends and his stupid cheap shots.

He glanced awkwardly at Chozen, suddenly flooded in guilt.

"Sorry for the cheap shot. You were a dick, but it didn't-it was all I could think of,"

Chozen blinked at him in surprise.

"I recovered."

Daniel nodded, taking a slice of the pizza out on the table, motioning for Chozen to help himself. He told him the joys of pizza, about how it was better in Newark, but how he was warming up to Californian pizza and this was pretty good. The guys chimed in, mentioning how it was from the place they always went, after tournaments with Johnny. How Johnny had picked the place.

Daniel smiled warmly as Bobby came back arms full.

Johnny returned followed by Ms. Lawrence.

"Hey boys, congratulations on your win Daniel," she said passing him a drink from the tray she was holding.

Passing out a root beer float to the guys.

"Mom this is-"

"Chozen right?" Ms. Lawrence asked.

Daniel watched Chozen sit up straighter.

Daniel smiled into his root beer float remembering that feeling. The feeling of realizing Johnny talked to his Mom, *who* that important pretty blonde was and the panic of every bad thing being known because if she could know who you were before being introduced it meant you'd been mentioned enough. Every bad deed, every poor interaction suddenly floating up to the forefront of your mind.

"Y-yes ma'am."

Chozen scrambled up, bowing quickly.

"How was your flight?"

"Long."

"Be nice to my boys, hmm?" she said before putting a root beer float in his hands.

"Of course, sorry, Ms...Johnny's... mom."

"Lawrence," Jimmy said, tugging on Chozen's shirt to pull him down next to them.

"Huh?"

"Her last name. Johnny's last name. It's Lawrence," Dutch said around a mouthful of pizza.

"Lawrence," Chozen repeated slowly.

"Laura Lawrence," Tommy said.

Chozen nodded.

She smiled turning to Johnny kissing him on the cheek. "I sat through the fight this time, I guess no need for a play-by-play."

"Right," Johnny said holding his drink a little lost looking,

"We'll find a way to adapt it, because I like doing this."

"Me too."

She put her hand on Johnny's shoulder. "You did well. I'm proud of you.'

"Thank you."

"Daniel?"

Daniel sat up a little straighter, wincing, a habit.

"I'm proud of you too. I'll give you a hug after you recover. Make sure you talk to your mom too. She was very worried, still is for you. She's been distracted by talking to Yukie and the girls, so make sure to pop

over soon."

"Of course, thank you Ms. Lawrence."

"Eat first. I know for sure, once you get over there you won't get near the food for a while again," she said smiling warmly at them all before heading off to return to the others. He watched as she walked to the kitchen refilled the tray and for two of them added some rum she grabbed from a bag. Watched as she passed out the root beer floats, the spiked ones for herself and his mother.

Daniel sunk carefully back down, picking up another slice.

She was right.

He leaned against Johnny who returned to his side, as they ate pizza and the guys talked about Cobra Kai and asked Chozen about what he was going to do now. If he was going to teach, giving their advice for what would make a better teacher than Kreese. Daniel was surprised at how Chozen listened like he was seriously taking note of their feedback.

After pizza, a slice of what ended up being a lemon and blueberry cake with cream cheese frosting, and a couple of Bobby's tea cookies, infused with tea that Bobby wanted notes on he bumped his shoulder against Johnny's shoulder motioning his head towards where the girls were sitting out on the deck, out in the garden.

Johnny nodded getting up, setting their root beer floats down and holding out his hands to help Daniel up. Daniel took them carefully, feeling a little stiff, a little sore. That high Johnny had mentioned was crashing. He was sore. But he was determined to see everyone before fully crashing. Before curling up in his bed.

He grabbed the rest of his float and they walked over to where ladies were.

"Daniel!" Ali said with a grin. "Way to kick ass!"

"Thanks," Daniel said.

"Johnny," Ali said with a nod.

"Ali."

Jessica rolled her eyes hugging both Daniel and Johnny. "I missed you

guys so much! We have so much to catch up on! The guys and I grabbed lunch today at...some burger joint, and it was kind of fun. We're going to have to do that soon. I'm in town for like two weeks. Also, how dare you for talking about the deathmatch and not mentioning Kumiko!"

"I know for sure I mentioned Kumiko," Daniel said as Jessica pulled away and Kumiko laughed.

"Yeah! Daniel how dare you not tell me about how cool Kumiko is!" Ali said gently slapping his chest.

"Johnny, why'd you hide her on the other end of the audience huh?" Jessica asked.

"I didn't want Daniel to see her and get thrown. I figured seeing you two would be about as much as he could handle for surprises."

Daniel wanted to argue that he was wrong, but he wasn't. Seeing Jessica had nearly thrown him. He probably would've thought he was dreaming or in Okinawa if he saw Sato, Chozen, Yukie, and Kumiko in the crowd.

Ali sighed, arms crossed. "I suppose that makes sense."

Kumiko hugged them both, gentler.

"They've been very kind, recommended we go dancing. Jessica said you guys knew a good place?"

"If Kumiko is in town then we absolutely have to," Daniel said.

"I'll talk to Dutch about it," Johnny said. "I don't know if we need tickets."

"I can't wait," Kumiko said warmly.

"We also have to show you around," Daniel said.

"You snooze you lose Daniel, we're showing her around," Ali said. "Tomorrow **we're** going to hit up the museums."

"Ali's invited both of us," Jessica said.

"It's a break from school, I'm sure you know," Ali said motioning towards the guys.

"She's also said we can have a sleepover," Kumiko said.

"She lives in a mansion!" Jessica said.

"It's going to be fun, but no boys allowed," Ali said. "You can get them back later."

Daniel felt a little sprout of jealously, then the gentle way Johnny took his hand.

"You *better* give them back," Johnny said. "You can't keep them."

Daniel knew he was teasing, it was in his stance, his tone.

He studied Johnny, studied Ali.

It was like they were having two conversations at the same time. He didn't understand it.

"You might have to fight me for them," Ali said.

"I'd rather not, you've got a mean right hook."

"Yeah, I do."

Oh.

He got part of it.

Ali was taking the girls to spend the night not just because she liked them, which she did genuinely, but so Daniel could sleep in. So he and Johnny could rest and recover from the fight and all the pain of everything.

It hurt his head.

Was that how they'd communicated before?

In layers?

The jealousy spiked and he held onto Johnny's hand tighter.

Johnny glanced at him then kissed the top of his head.

The girls talked a little more about dancing, about the things they wanted to do while they were all in town. It sounded like Kumiko would be around a month before she had to be back in Tokyo. They

were talking about their classes, about performances, parties and learning about being in a new place with new people.

Johnny gently pulled on Daniel's hand, they'd see the girls more later. Their moms were standing on the edge of the garden.

His mom stopped mid-sentence rushing over and was suddenly frantic.

"Have you done any first aid care?"

"Yes Mrs. LaRusso," Johnny said. "I got him a couple of ice packs and put the green stuff Mr. Miyagi makes on a lot of the bruising. I'm sure there's more, but he's been...a bit stubborn. Nothing is broken or seems to be pulled."

"*Lucille*," his mom said.

Daniel blinked in surprise looked at the way Johnny recovered and then smiled, pleased.

"He really can be stubborn," his mom said. "Did you tell him he was going to be in pain tomorrow?"

"Ma!"

"Of course Lucille," Johnny said. "He keeps brushing it off."

Traitor.

"You know, maybe you should lock yourselves up in the bathroom and make sure you didn't miss a spot. Daniel's probably embarrassed to be fussed over in front of all your friends. You got to be very thorough. Plus maybe if he sees how much of him is bruised he might relent and let you help him," Ms. Lawrence said.

She said it seriously. Straight faced. But she winked at him when he looked at her.

"You know that's a good idea," Lucille said. "He's been through so much tonight you want to make sure it doesn't spill too much into tomorrow and the rest of the week while all of your friends are here."

Daniel swallowed hard. He didn't know how he felt about the recommendation. Maybe if it hadn't been from Johnny's mom. Maybe if he'd come up with himself.

"You did so well," Lucille said smiling at him. "I'm proud of my two-time champion. Don't worry we'll keep celebrating for a while."

Johnny seemed to have thought it over and Daniel felt a gentle tug on his hand.

Daniel's mom kissed his forehead. She was wearing the lipstick that left marks.

"Ma!"

She laughed rubbing at it. "Whoops, Johnny you might want to help get rid of that too."

Johnny nodded pulling him off towards the bathroom. On the way, Daniel glanced deeper into the garden. Sitting out in the garden lit by only lantern light was Mr. Miyagi, sitting between Sato and Yukie drinking tea. Even though Daniel couldn't see his face he knew Mr. Miyagi was smiling. That his heart was full and bursting. He thought he understood that. Felt it reflected, mirrored under everything else within himself, following Johnny. Peace. Happiness.

Chapter End Notes

Lemon Blueberry cake with cream cheese frosting recipe
some tea cookie recipes

Home is Where your Heart is

Johnny was getting frustrated. Daniel was standing in the bathroom light arms crossed refusing to budge.

"I've seen it all before."

"It's different!"

"Okay well, will you do it yourself?"

"No."

"Daniel, you know how slow and how painful it is to recover without Mr. Miyagi's goop. This is like, magic, even you said so."

"You know that stuff reeks."

"I do," Johnny stepping closer into Daniel's space. "And I've already gotten a lot of it. So I don't understand, what's wrong?"

Daniel looked away with mumbled. "What if you don't want to sleep next to me tonight?"

Johnny wondered if he should take his shirt off.

It'd worked when Daniel hadn't been able to sleep.

But he feared if he did it too much Daniel would catch on.

"I can't sleep anywhere else," Johnny said sinking down onto the tile in front of Daniel. "Because you're in debt to me and I'm not giving up my spot until long after it's paid off."

Daniel looked down at him, confused.

"You forgot your promised I.O.U already? You also owe me many many many many millions of kisses. I plan to collect on all of those."

Daniel stared down at him. He never thought he'd have to work so hard to get Daniel out of his pants. But he still had a few tricks up his sleeves. A few things he knew for sure usually worked with Daniel.

He gently placed his hand on Daniel's hip and held his gaze.

"Please Daniel, let me see?"

Almost.

It was teetering.

Daniel was reaching out towards him- damn it wrong direction.

He'd probably fucked up. It was a very thin and almost constantly moving line that sent Daniel down a horny road. And Johnny already had learned beaten and bruised didn't seem to stop the guy. Daniel was gently cupping his face, thumbs on his cheeks. Johnny moved to kiss Daniel's hand.

"Let me take care of you."

"I don't want to see," Daniel whispered after a moment.

Like it was something hard to get out.

They all had made a big deal out of it, all the bruising, the beaten he'd taken.

Maybe it was overwhelming.

He could fix that.

"Come down here then," Johnny said.

Daniel waited only a moment before stiffly working his way down to the tile next to him.

"Close your eyes."

Daniel frowned at him.

"I'm serious, close your eyes, let me work, don't look."

Daniel sighed and shut his eyes. "Okay."

Johnny leaned in close, he had a wet washcloth and worked on the smear of red lipstick on Daniel's forehead.

"Not so bad huh?"

Daniel let out a huff. "You know that wasn't what I meant."

"I know," Johnny said kissing him. "Mind lifting your arms?"

He might as well take the time to re-check everything. If Daniel was

nervous about seeing all the damage Barnes had done it'd be imperative that Johnny got it right in the moment Daniel let him.

Daniel started complaining but it was all steam. He still did as Johnny asked and Daniel studied his skin, the spots he's been able to reach earlier were still fine. But there were things he missed.

Johnny kissed his shoulder, in a spot that wasn't hurt, opening the jar and getting to work.

He'd try to be fast. Listening to Daniel complain. Kissing him frequently, when he could, working his way over everything he could see, checking for damage that was worse.

They were lucky. Lucky Daniel had instinctively moved to protect himself when he could.

He hated that. Hated to be relieved that it wasn't worse. Knowing the whole time Kreese and Silver could've told Barnes to break something and he would've. Not just taken him out but snapped something.

"Can you lift your hips?"

Daniel's complaints stalled for a moment as he pushed himself up.

Johnny worked quickly, stripping him down to check for more injuries.

"Why is it you're in such a rush to get me naked when I'm hurt?" Daniel complained.

"Just you wait."

"For what?"

"Till we move."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

It wasn't as bad as he feared, but everything still looked bruised.

"You don't want anything happening on a bathroom floor."

Maybe he could distract with talking.

"You don't know that, maybe it's on my list," Daniel said.

"Seriously? Should I just assume **anywhere** is on your list?"

"Yes."

Johnny sighed, "You do realize some places are just kind of gross."

"If I cleaned the bathroom?"

"Maybe ours."

"Aha! We will complete the list."

"How long is this list?"

Daniel got quiet at that. Thoughtful. Doing math. Johnny hurried to finish bandaging, finish checking.

"I'm going to assume that means it's long," Johnny said.

Taking clothes off of someone was easier than putting them on. Though Daniel thankfully wasn't as unwieldy to re-dress as the kids he babysat, who hated jackets and their pajamas.

"I hate this," Daniel said with a frown.

"Helping you get dressed? You made it seem sweet and romantic when you helped me with it."

"That was different."

"How?"

Daniel frowned. "because-"

"Could you get up a little?"

Daniel sighed pushing himself up a little stiffly. "You getting hurt, needing help. That's-"

"What?" Johnny asked grabbing Daniel's shirt to help him into it.

Daniel's eyes opened after Johnny got his head through. "You're tough. It's nice being needed or able to help you. You let me in. I like it. But I'm **always** getting hurt, and people are always after me. You, the guys, Chozen, Barnes, Silver. After a while, it's gotten...I'd rather

ignore it. I'm getting tired of it. And-"

Johnny pulled the shirt the rest of the way down and stepped back, waiting.

Daniel was looking down at the tiled floor with a frown.

"What if you get tired of it? Tired of me coming home hurt? Tired of patching me up because I keep getting into fights? Because I'm not strong enough to end it at the start? It always draws out and gets worse. And that attempted revival of Cobra Kai...that **hurt** Johnny. Silver tricking me. Barnes being everywhere. He found us while out running. They broke into the house. You and every person out there that I love are in danger just by being around me."

Johnny sat down on the edge of the tub. "I know what it's like for pain to become part of the norm. Do you think the way I handle it is good?"

Daniel blinked looking down at him surprised.

"I don't complain. I don't let anyone make a fuss. I didn't ever tell anyone where it came from or who did it. You had to pry it out. If you hadn't my mom might still be married to Sid and I'd still be miserable."

Johnny reached out gently taking Daniel's hands in his. "I know I said I was worried I'd stopped you from getting away from the danger you attract by hurting your knee. But I didn't tell you that my thought then was to follow you around and have your back. That's still my plan. To be there. I want to fight by your side, not watch from the sidelines, not to find out about it later. I think we'd kick ass together. And yeah it sucks, but it's like that balance wheel. I know you've got my back. And I've got yours. I'm not going anywhere. I'll bandage you up with this stinky stuff every single time you come home hurt and sleep next to you. Just like I know you will. And the only reason I'll get tired of it is because I wasn't there by your side to help you through it."

Johnny stood up, gently pulling Daniel over towards the sink, throwing his arm over Daniel's shoulder.

"Look in the mirror."

"Johnny-"

"Go on."

Daniel sighed, and Johnny knew Daniel was looking at him, not himself.

"Yourself."

Daniel grumbled but did.

"Is that the same kid from Jersey, from Newark?"

"I don't know."

"That's because it's a trick question."

"Then how was I supposed to answer that?"

Johnny laughed softly. "Rhe guys were in this class where they were supposed to figure out who they are and it's not easy. But I think it depends. You are Daniel LaRusso, a two-time karate champion. You've won a death match in Okinawa. You used to just be this little shrimp from Newark New Jersey who talked a lot. And you still are a chatty Italian from Newark. But that's only **part** of who you are. You're no longer shrimpy. You kick ass. Make friends everywhere you go and enemies. But sometimes you turn those enemies into friends. Hell, you're moving in with one of them. Me. That's me."

Daniel laughed. "I got that part. "

"And I'm pretty damn excited about it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I don't care that I may or may not be bandaging up your wounds. Who knows maybe you won't really get into fisticuffs with anyone for decades. Maybe it's going to get really boring. But I know I'm not going to ever get bored because you contain multitudes. You're better than a good book."

Johnny leaned over and kissed the side of his temple.

"Nerd," Daniel said.

"Hey. The point is, be nicer to yourself. We're all here because we love you."

"Chozen does not love me."

Johnny laughed. "No, probably not. But he's warming up and for him

that's progress. So, are you ready to enjoy being with everyone? To be able to tell your mom that you're all bandaged up, finally, and can avoid some of that worry? And I'll finally stop pestering you because you're better?"

Daniel sighed. "Yeah, just one second."

Johnny watched as Daniel stood a little taller, looking himself in the mirror, shoulders back before turning back and kissing him and slipping out of the door.

Johnny smiled following him out into the room full of their friends and family.

Sato, Mrs. Larusso *Lucille,* his mom, Yukie, and Mr. Miyagi were still awake in the garden playing games and drinking something Sato had brought from Okinawa when they went to bed.

The girls had left with Ali leaving Chozen waffling between staying with the adult adults or going with the guys who were determined to camp on their floor.

The guys had looked at Daniel first, trying to determine whether or not to bring Chozen with them but eventually, Daniel sighed, a confirmation.

After a long night of talking to people of shouting which he hadn't done in so long, Johnny was ready for bed. He showered and let them all figure it out themselves. Whatever Daniel was comfortable with.

Johnny didn't care.

All he wanted was to curl up in bed next to Daniel.

After his shower, he did just that. Walked past the bodies and curled up in bed next to Daniel.

Daniel was sitting up, asking about things they should do since everyone was in town and the guys were giving ideas.

Chozen was sitting on the floor next to Tommy and near the door.

"Museums?"

"Ali said she's doing that."

"Ball game?"

"Oh, that could be fun."

"Tours of the studios?"

"Maybe."

"To the beach? The pier?"

"That could be fun."

Johnny wrapped an arm around Daniel's waist, laying down. He smelled like green goop. But also like Daniel, and he could ignore the green goop smell.

He listened to the soft chatter, the laughter.

It felt like home. But he knew the place didn't matter. The moments. The people. That's what mattered.

"Where do you want this Johnny?"

"What's it say on the box?"

"Kitchen."

"So where do you think it goes?"

"Kitchen."

"Yup."

Daniel and he had spent almost a week splitting their time working at the shop, cleaning up their new place, and packing everything up.

Daniel was adamant about labeling everything with a thick black marker sharpie. He'd even gotten Johnny's back when he had fallen asleep after a late night of packing at Mr. Miyagi's.

Mr. Miyagi's place had been easy. So had all of the stuff at Jimmy's that was already packed. But it'd still been exhausting.

Johnny still didn't have a clue what Daniel had written. He couldn't see it. But sometimes Daniel lifted up his shirt to look at his back and

then seemed too pleased with himself. The guys had seen it. Refused to tell him what it said. He was going to scrub it off if he could figure out where the hell it was.

The girls had helped. Or offered to help. Kumiko and Jessica were helping. Ali was complaining.

Why did Johnny and Daniel get to move into a nice apartment like they had their lives together but Ali had to share a dorm room with a whole bunch of girls who hadn't ever shared space before and had guys over all the time? So really it was like Ali and her roommate were cramming three people into a tiny room that in the pictures looked cool and spacious but was actually a tiny dingy cell. And yet Daniel and Johnny had a whole ass apartment.

"Natural lighting. A fucking balcony. Sinks that don't drip."

"Johnny could fix that if it did drip. Not a problem," Daniel said putting their mugs carefully into the cabinets.

There was something in his tone, a type of pride that Johnny could fix things.

"Learned it from Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said softly.

"Hell, your fridge is already full!"

"Their moms," Jessica said. "I came with them yesterday."

"Jimmy too," Daniel said. "He filled it with drinks."

"Had to get around your mom's to sneak the beer in," Jimmy said.

"Spoiled. You two are absolutely spoiled."

"There's also a pool," Bobby said. "With water in it."

"Did you see all the cookies?" Kumiko asked helping herself to one, passing one to Chozen.

"That'd be Bobby," Daniel said.

"This is seriously unfair," Ali said. "Also who needs a bed that big? How'd it even get up here?"

"Mom did it," Johnny said with a shrug. "I don't know how she does it she always figures stuff like that out."

Daniel had picked it out. He and his mom had gone out after their little tea or brunch dates to look at the bed. His mom said it could be one of their housewarming gifts.

She'd laughed, leaning forward, voice dropped all conspiratorial to tell Johnny at one of their dinners that Daniel had taken the whole thing seriously. Had asked the staff lots of questions.

"He was looking for a bed...oh how did he put it....all his friends could sleep in but wouldn't feel too lonely when it was just him and his partner. It was very sweet. The staff always thought he was part of one of those orgy cults though."

He'd asked Daniel about it. When they were driving to pick up Kumiko and Jessica from Ali's days before they moved in.

Daniel was adamant he drive. Kept putting his hand too high on his thigh to be acceptable with guests.

Johnny wondered if they were playing a game of chicken. When would Johnny tell him to stop?

He was thinking of letting the game go. Let the girls tease Daniel about it.

"Heard you've gotten a new bed," Johnny had started.

"**We** have a new bed. Courtesy of your mom. Which is kind of weird."

"Beds are expensive," Johnny said.

"Yeah...they really are. I tried to tell your mom it was okay. I mean we have **my** bed and she wouldn't take no for an answer. She did that thing where she hooked her arm through mine and said *We're already here there's no harm in looking*. Which I didn't realize was this thing she does until I talked to my mom. But it's apparently a thing, a weapon she uses on LaRusso's. No harm in looking she says. And then my mom says we end up leaving with our arms full of something not knowing what had happened and not a penny from our accounts are gone. She spoils us. Ma said they went to look at decor right? For her place and she left with a huge painting that she liked and like table lamps. Stuff she didn't *need* but had liked. And your mom, right, she said *It won't be here the next time, so how about I get it and then if you change your mind and don't like it we'll bring it back.* Did that happen? No. And the receipt miraculously disappeared when Ma wanted to pay her back. Your mom is as sneaky as you. Anyway so we go in and she's chatting up

the salespeople all friendly and smiles and talking about bedding and thread count and...."

He got quiet, his face was a little red. Johnny had looked over, put his hand over Daniel's.

"They asked who the bed was for, and she didn't outright say it, but the salesperson thought I was her son. Or well one of her sons. She joked that she had 6 of them, but it was for me really. For the boys still at home. I didn't think she'd ever... I mean..."

"You should try calling her by her name."

Daniel's hand nearly flew off his leg, stunned, "What? No! I can't!"

That'd been another conversation they'd had. His mother teased him that he was on a first-name basis with Lucille.

"Are you there with Daniel?" Johnny had asked.

She'd looked at him over her glass of wine, all mischief. "I never told him he couldn't."

"*Mom*."

"What?" she asked innocently. "There is only so much I can do to try and be less intimidating. He's going to have to get there himself. Besides, I do like him. I like him for you. And I like his family, the ones I've met. His grandparents seem nice."

"Did you meet them? How?"

"Oh no, not in person. Lucille gave me the phone, just shoved it in my hands because dinner was starting to boil over. I explained and apologized for taking over the phone and as soon as I said who I was they started gushing over you. And that is always top on my list of conversations. Easily can talk for hours about you. They wanted to know all about your apartment hunting. How it's going at the shop. If you like it. When you're going to visit again. You know getting along with the in-laws that's an important step."

"Mom!"

"I'm just saying, you're set, honey. A cute boyfriend who can cook and adores you and his family loves you. If the two of you can avoid getting into fights or starting I don't know karate wars then I think it's

smooth sailing. And that's such a relief."

She'd seemed so sure, so happy for him.

"You can say it, it's just a name," Johnny told Daniel.

"It's rude! It's presumptuous," Daniel said parking in front of Ali's.

The door opened and the girls came out. Ali in tow.

"See, I'll show you. Ali, when did you get onto a first name basis with Johnny's mom?"

"Never," Ali said hopping into the back. "I'm coming with. My parents are going to the country club all day. I'd rather not answer *How's college?* 12,000 times."

"See?" Daniel asked. "I don't want to be the guy who called his boyfriend's mom by her first name without her permission."

Jessica leaned forward in the car, over the middle of the front seat, "Wait, is Johnny telling you to call his mom by her first name?"

"Yes."

"Then I think you can call her by her first name," Jessica said.

"Thank you," Johnny said.

"What? No. It's got to come from the person. It's like- okay so there was this kid in Newark with this nickname. But if you weren't given permission to call him by the nickname it was like super rude. Just because you give me permission doesn't mean it's not still rude. It just means I can call her her name around you. But even then if I start doing that I know myself and I'll fuck up and call her that to her face or like other people."

"Daniel it's seriously not that hard," Johnny said.

"Kumiko help me here," Daniel said when they came to a stoplight.

"It's Johnny's mother, surely he knows best."

"Yeah Daniel, Johnny never gave me that permission," Ali said.

"Outnumbered Daniel," Jessica said with a grin.

"I should kick you all out," Daniel said but there was no bite to it.

"Nuh-uh, we're going to the pier," Ali said. "I want some greasy deep-fried thing and ice cream and watch some gull try to steal someone's fries."

Daniel sighed, hand settling on Johnny's leg.

"Is that a common occurrence?" Ali asked.

"Oh all the time," Jessica said.

"Very much so," Kumiko said.

"What?" Daniel asked.

"You just casually feeling up Johnny."

"I am not."

"You are too. Laying claim."

"Am not."

"I always thought it was not wanting to lose track of him."

"How would he lose track of him? Daniel is your peripheral vision that bad?"

"Hey."

"Johnny, how long has he been doing this?" Ali asked.

"Almost ever since I apologized."

"That's nearly a year ago! Johnny, how the hell did you not know he liked you?"

"I thought he was just touchy with people," Johnny said stiffly.

"I should be the one offended," Ali said sinking back. "We were still dating then."

"Dating? You dated Daniel?" Kumiko asked in surprise.

"I dated both of them," Ali said waving her hand.

"At the same time?" Kumiko asked, eyes wide.

"No! I dated Johnny for two years, we broke up. I met Daniel over the summer, we became friends, and then started dating after...well it was kind of hit or miss whether I knew he liked it. Seriously Johnny, Daniel was much clearer with you than he was with me."

"Somehow I doubt that," Johnny said.

"I tried different tactics okay? Johnny didn't understand like 90% of my flirting, so I tried body language," Daniel said with a sigh pulling up to the pier and parking.

Johnny leaned over kissing him. "Sorry for not getting the memo."

Daniel wasn't actually upset. Johnny could tell that. He was just sparking back over the teasing. Probably uneasy about getting up the nerve to call his mom by her first name. A big step.

They walked along the pier.

Johnny got fish and chips from one of the vendors and the girls got tacos and burritos. Daniel stole some of Johnny's fish and chips.

All the tension in Daniel's shoulders from ever since Silver had broken into the house and Barnes had popped up seemed to be gone. A distant memory. At least in the bright California sun with some of their friends.

No one spent the night. It'd been shocking how fast the guys had unpacked everything. They were getting scary good at it.

They'd stayed until a little after dinner, then threw an arm around Chozen's shoulder and said they'd get him back to Mr. Miyagi's and see them later.

The girls headed out too and then it was just the two of them.

Johnny was dripping sweat. He wiped his forehead off with the bottom of his shirt.

He'd lugged a lot of stuff up the stairs, set up a lot of furniture, but it was officially a livable space.

"I'm going to take a shower," he said.

"...yeah, okay," Daniel said voice tight.

There were lots of parts to their new apartment that Johnny liked.

He liked the pool, liked that there was a rooftop space that the owner said they could barbeque on or host parties, he liked that there was security downstairs, that there was a balcony. That they had a nice kitchen that Daniel liked that looked easy to navigate. Liked that the bathroom had a tall shower.

He wouldn't have to bend down as he had been for...it'd been over six months. Other than the night at the hotel, in Okinawa, and at Mr. Miyagi's he had to crouch down to shower.

He rolled his shoulders under the hot water. It was nice to not hunch anymore.

He heard the door open.

He listened.

Silence.

"You should know both my boyfriend and myself are award-winning black belts in karate."

He heard Daniel laugh. "You thought I was an intruder?"

He heard Daniel moving around, the sound of clothing on the tile.

"You didn't say anything. I'd rather not flirt with an intruder thinking it was you. That'd be embarrassing what if they flirted back? I'd have to tell them whoops thought you were my boyfriend."

"New apartment with great security that impressed your mother and the guys and you think our first night someone would sneak in and the first thing they'd do is follow you into the shower?" Daniel asked pushing back the curtain and stepping in.

"Covering my bases," Johnny said pulling him close.

"And if you'd known it was me?"

"I figured it was you."

"But if you'd been a hundred percent?"

"Then maybe I'd have asked you if you were the one who put the lube in the shower?" Johnny asked pointing to where it was nestled in

amongst their shower products.

"Why would you think I did that?" Daniel asked.

"It fits, but also knowing our friends, if you didn't do it then we're going to be finding lube and condoms everywhere."

"Sounds fun, like a treasure hunt. Could make a game of it."

"So you didn't stick the lube in here?"

"I did, but what if when we find some, that's where we have sex?"

"I feel like you know where everything is, that's an unfair advantage."

"You don't know that. You said so yourself the guys might've put some in weird places."

"Yeah, that was *if* you hadn't done this. But you said you did. Which means maybe they weren't *that* weird."

"Still could be fun."

"Hey," Johnny said cupping Daniel's face in his hands.

"Not fun? I mean you could hide some too-"

"Daniel-"

"Yeah?"

"Welcome home," Johnny said leaning down and kissing him.

Let in

Chapter Notes

> We are nearing the end of this fic. I want to take my time on the final chapters, so I won't be able to continue the daily posting in order to make sure I get everything the way I want.
> There will be at least two more chapters, I can't say for certain how many more exactly because sometimes I end up making more chapters than I expected. (I mean this is over 100 and I never expected that when I started lol)

"Daniel do you have the capacity to sit still for a long period of time?" Dutch asked. "Like not move a muscle?"

Dutch had come over for breakfast. Daniel didn't know when or how Dutch had made himself a key, or how he'd gotten an all-clear from security to not get stopped. But he was making them omelets so Daniel couldn't complain. He figured he should just assume they all had keys. Maybe Johnny had given them copies, in case. Daniel shouldn't have been surprised to leave his room, rubbing his eyes to start making coffee to find Dutch in their kitchen looking in their fridge. To look over and Dutch just ask "Want an omelet?" Coffee already was going. Maybe Ali was right. They were spoiled.

"Is it time for that again?" Johnny asked from where he sat holding his coffee. He'd only said "hey" to Dutch when he'd seen him. Like he wasn't surprised that their bubble of privacy was gone after one night. Maybe Daniel should've been grateful it'd lasted that long.

"Yeah," Dutch said with a sigh. Like whatever they were talking about was a hassle. A big chore that he had to do.

"You're parents said Daniel could join? Thought they were very particular about the whole thing."

Dutch slid a perfectly golden yellow omelet onto a plate and down in front of Daniel. "That's the frustrating thing right? I was always like Can I invite more friends? They were like *Johnny is okay*. But- *remember what happened last time*"

"What happened last time?" Daniel asked around a mouthful. Dutch had added a whole bunch of vegetables into the omelet, stuff Daniel liked, and damn if he hadn't perfected his omelet skills since the

summer. Daniel might forgive him for essentially breaking in to make them breakfast.

"When I was little I begged my parents to let a friend come over," Dutch said turning back to the stove to work on the next omelet.

"He was in preschool," Johnny added.

"And they finally relented and this kid came home with me and we played and then the kid saw my parents he gave them this note from his parents right? I couldn't read yet I figured it was something like *my child can't eat sugar* or something like that because that was what my prissy preschool was like. A bunch of snotty kids who couldn't eat bread, or sugar, or have milk, not because they were allergic but because their parents read some stupid book and thought their kids should only eat like meat blessed by some traveling monk or something."

"I ran into a couple of those at one of my prep schools," Johnny said.

"Right?" Dutch said waving the spatula. "Like fine, live your life, but they're so prissy about it. Anyway, so the letter my parents ended up reading it aloud. *Dear Mr. and Mrs. Dutch. My kid will continue being friends with your kid if you invest in my project. It's a startup for blah blah blah.* Essentially send money home with my kid or they won't stay friends with yours. And the damn kid knew it too. That his friendship was a fucking transaction. I thought we were friends over some stupid coloring page thing we'd worked on together and we liked the same stupid cartoon and he'd shared like a snack with me. Didn't know his parents had seen me dropped off and were like go be nice to that kid, we'll give you a new toy if you befriend him. I was so pissed I bit the kid. Fucking hard too, had to get stitches. I was so hurt because my parents had warned me. So that was the last time I was allowed to have anyone over. And they reminded me of it every damn time unless it was Johnny."

"Because he took care of you when you were sick?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah, and my parents liked him because he never wanted to talk about business or money. They'd be like so Johnny what are you working on? And Johnny would be like karate with Dutch and the guys. How's school, Johnny? Good, we're learning xyz. What do you want to do Johnny? No clue. Park ranger? They liked it because everyone else would be like "I'm working on my stock portfolio, I'm studying this so that I can get into Oxford and I want to be a CEO for

this stupid company." And Johnny was grounded and polite. He had all the skills to be a bitchy rich kid but never was. Which when my parents found out why, just like the rest of us, oh they were so fucking pissed. *That bastard put his hands on Johnny?* Yeah, that's what the whole damn lawsuit is over. *Kreese did too?* Yeah, that's what the other lawsuit is on. *Why didn't you say anything?* What was I supposed to do? *Tell us*. What would you have done? *Adopted him.* He has a mom. That's not how that shit works. *Adopted both of them.* You want to adopt like a woman your own damn age? How's that going to work huh? They didn't have a response to that. But it shocked them for sure. Money solves so many problems for them, creates more problems. But when they like people they get protective," Dutch sighed setting an omelet down in front of Johnny then turning back around. "Anyway, I think seeing everyone who showed up also kind of shocked them. I think they thought they were it, right? That they'd found out a secret, knew this cool kid who was a good friend to me, didn't realize how many *other* people had also known that. Because Johnny didn't know. Didn't realize, so like he didn't talk about his Abuela or her family, or the libraries or anything and I think they realized that meant Johnny didn't talk about *them*. And man, you'd think that'd hurt their feelings right? Johnny only talked about us guys. But they *liked* it. Made them feel like a best kept secret. Liked the look on Sid's face when they showed up. Were so damn smug over it. Like *yeah you stupid mother fucker, your kid has powerful friends but doesn't gossip or name drop like a sniveling worm like you are. He lets people keep their privacy*. And that's such a big thing my parents love. But they also saw the guys right? Like in a completely different light, because they saw how hard we worked on the whole damn thing and they were like *Dutch why didn't you ever invite them over? You need to show all these friends you have*. And I was like because you fucking told me not to! Hell, they still think I fucking bite people, I was like three years old! You can't blame my shit taste in friends and being tricked when I was three."

"Didn't you bite kids in elementary school?" Johnny asked.

"They deserved it. It's different. They tried to get me to eat bugs. I didn't want to, I liked bugs. They wouldn't leave me the fuck alone so we got into a fight. I hadn't learned how to do karate yet. So I did what I did know how to do. Bite. It's one of the reasons I did karate. For discipline and to learn how to fight without biting."

He sat down across from them with a sigh, digging into his own omelet.

"Listen, it's a big deal that they realized I've got friends that aren't out after favors. That they don't want it to just be Johnny. So Daniel man dress up, but comfortable and do whatever the hell you have to to sit still, okay?"

"Takes *hours,*" Johnny said.

Daniel glanced at him, how serious he was, at Dutch eating his omelet.

"When?"

"Saturday, got to be there at 7 am."

"Okay."

"Yeah? You can do it?"

Daniel smiled softly reaching out and patting Dutch's hand. "It's important, right? I'll be there."

Dutch smiled, a warm smile like he'd been worried Daniel would say no. Dutch had been there for him, but hadn't realized it went both ways and not just for tournaments.

"You guys mind picking up Jessica?" Dutch asked.

"Sure. I think she's still at my mom's," Johnny said.

Dutch nodded.

"Thanks the house is going to be hectic."

"Need us to bring anything?" Johnny asked.

"Coffee?"

"With three Irish creamer cups and a packet of hot chocolate in it from the gas station?" Johnny asked.

"You know it."

"Got it."

"Daniel, you still want to do morning runs?" Dutch asked.

"Maybe not for a bit. I kind of want to relax, is that okay?"

"Yeah, that's fine. You've earned it."

"Thanks."

Their new schedule felt luxurious after all the stress and anxiety related to the tournament was over.

Not getting up at five am to run.

Not training in the garden late into the evening.

Daniel would get up to the alarm and would turn it off and then wake up Johnny. He learned that if he peppered Johnny with a bunch of kisses he'd wake up laughing, like it tickled, squirming out of the way. It got him up faster.

He loved their shower. It was so much bigger and he wasn't worried about being in there too long, worrying about Mr. Miyagi needing the bathroom. He liked that there was enough space for all his stuff. That by setting out sunblock on the counter Johnny was using it. Kumiko had brought him some night cream from Tokyo and he was trying to get Johnny to use that too, but that'd be a process. He'd be patient.

He liked that by the time he stepped out of the shower the apartment smelled like freshly brewed coffee, and his mug was set out for him at his place at the table. That Johnny would cook if no one else was there. Would set out those pamphlets about schools for him to read while he ate. But usually by the time he came out of the shower other people were over. Because it was still break the guys would be over for breakfast.

Bobby made cinnamon rolls, Jimmy had made corned beef and hash, Tommy made waffles and Dutch stuck to his eggs, though he was branching out to frittatas and quiches.

The girls came sometimes too, sitting at their table.

He never would've expected them all to show up so early, before work, while on vacation to sit around with them while they got ready for the day, talking. But he liked it. Liked seeing them before work, hearing about what they'd do for the day.

When Kumiko came she'd bring Chozen.

Chozen made them breakfast one morning. He'd come in with his arms full of bags and went to work quietly while everyone talked. It was like what Mr. Miyagi would make. Like what they had sometimes in Okinawa. But more. When he was done he kept setting more food onto the table. He'd made the eggs Mr. Miyagi had made sometimes, rice, soup, grilled fish, a cucumber salad, and pickles.

Daniel frowned. Chozen set most of it in front of Johnny. The bastard was showing off he could cook.

He set something that looked like beans in front of Kumiko on her rice.

"Hey," Kumiko complained.

"It's good for you. Eat it."

Kumiko frowned.

"Want me to list all the health benefits?" Chozen asked arms folded.

"I know what they are,"

"Then eat it."

"I'm on vacation."

"It's good for your bones. Dancers need good strong bones."

Kumiko sighed, rolling her eyes.

"What is it?" Johnny asked.

"Want to try it?" Kumiko asked.

"Uh sure."

"It's not popular with westerners," Chozen warned.

"But it's healthy right?" Johnny asked holding his bowl of rice over to Kumiko who picked a single bean up with her chopsticks and Daniel watched as sticky strings followed it before she set it on his rice.

"It's called Nattō," Chozen said. "Fermented soybeans."

"Can't believe you brought it with you," Kumiko said with a sour look on her face.

"Didn't have to," Chozen said. "Found it at the store with Yukie. She worried you're not eating healthy enough. Said Tokyo might be too much fast food."

"Since when did you and Aunt Yukie team up?"

"I've been helping her with her garden. And we have game night with Uncle three times a week."

Kumiko sighed and sunk back into her chair, mumbling.

"Is it good?" Jessica asked.

"It's *healthy,"* Kumiko complained. "When we discussed coming to LA I wanted to eat burgers and ice cream and all the sweets and junk food. And Chozen keeps giving me health food."

Johnny was staring at his single bean then popped it and a bit of rice into his mouth, eating thoughtfully. "Not bad."

"Seriously?"

"Would you like more?" Chozen asked getting the container again.

"Hold it Chozen," Kumiko said. "Johnny want mine? We could swap rice bowls."

"Sure," Johnny said holding out his for Kumiko.

"Don't tell Aunt Yukie," Kumiko said quickly taking the plain rice. "I get it. Thanks, Chozen but hey, Johnny's eating the healthy stuff okay? It's a good trade."

Chozen frowned but nodded.

Daniel grabbed one of the beans out of Johnny's bowl of rice, trying it. Nutty, but texturally he hated it.

"Not for everyone," Chozen said, almost smugly.

"This is all delicious, thank you Chozen," Johnny said.

Chozen smiled, proud of himself, insufferably, in his stance.

Damn it.

Johnny was right.

It was good. Daniel ate bitterly, wanting to hate it.

Listening to everyone talk, trying the nattō, trying everything.

Jessica liked the nattō and split it with Johnny.

After breakfast, they went to the shop.

Jessica would hang out with Ali, with the guys, with Kumiko.

But Sato and Yukie would come to the shop with Mr. Miyagi. They would be there when they arrived.

Sato and Chozen would leave after an hour to go work on the dojo's.

They were repainting, changing out the mats.

Sometimes Yukie would go with them to help.

The guys tried to go once, but the memories of the place were still too strong. They warned Johnny and Daniel not to go. And Sato and Chozen never asked, never offered. Like it was something unspoken. Until the bad energy was aired out, until it looked different enough. Which Daniel appreciated because he didn't want to go. He didn't want to remember the way Silver would walk around him, the way he'd stalked him literally, and in the way he moved. He'd thought it had been his teaching style but had realized later that it'd been because he viewed Daniel as prey because it'd all been a game. He also didn't want to remember Kreese and his hands on Johnny.

They usually had lunch together though, some local shop where Johnny introduced them to the local staff who warmed up immediately because of Johnny's introduction.

And in the evenings they'd go home together, bidding Mr. Miyagi a good night when Yukie came to pick him up, having borrowed the truck for errands.

Mr. Miyagi had offered to let her drive one of the other cars, one of the classics and she'd laughed saying she liked the truck, that the other cars felt too fancy.

"Think she's staying?" Johnny had asked, a bit hopeful one evening when they drove home.

"I'd like to think so, but I think she's going back with Kumiko," Daniel said with a sigh.

He hated it. She'd be so lonely, especially with Sato and Chozen, annoying as he was, being in LA. It sounded like they were keeping Yukie from being lonely and if she went back alone that meant they wouldn't be helping her in the garden or having game night. And Mr. Miyagi was so damn happy they were there. Even Chozen. He'd laughed and said Chozen was working very hard.

Daniel assumed that meant he'd put Chozen to work.

Johnny made a sound rather than comment like he didn't like it but didn't know what to do about it, what to say. And Daniel got that.

At home they'd stop to check for mail, since everyone was in town it meant nothing but junk mail and bills, say hi to the security guards, and then they'd make their way up to their apartment, a quiet ride in the elevator. It was the same every day which let them meet a kid who lived four floors down with a dog bigger than her sitting patiently waiting for their floor.

"Bye Mr. Lawrence, Mr. LaRusso," the kid said as the dog rushed out as the doors open.

"That's kind of weird right?" Daniel asked when the door closed.

"Polite kid."

"But being **Mr**. LaRusso, some kid calling me that's kind of weird. I mean I'm only 19, hell you're 18."

"She's seven, we're ancient in her eyes."

"When I was her age-"

"Exactly my point."

Daniel rolled his eyes. "Okay yeah, I hear it."

They'd walked into their apartment which was Daniel's favorite part of the day. Tossing the keys into the bowl. Being home. Their home was so refreshing. Arms wrapped around him, pulling him back into a kiss, the door slowly clicking shut. A kind of kiss that was like it was more necessary than air, like it ranked higher on that list of needs, until Daniel was breathless when Johnny pulled away, "Welcome home."

That was something that was taking getting used to.

Johnny always liked kissing, always slow long languid kisses, but

somehow he'd taken it up a notch now that they had their own place. The way they usually ended up on the couch, the door locked just in case their friends came over so they'd have a moment to get redressed or grab a blanket at least.

They ordered take-out for dinner more often than Daniel would let anyone know. Though Chozen had figured it out when he saw all the take-out flyers.

"I thought you cooked, pasta?" he'd said quietly, frowning at a take-out menu on one of the breakfasts where Bobby was making pancakes filled with cinnamon and chocolate chips.

"I do," Daniel said prickling.

"Hmm."

"What does *hmm* mean?"

"No ring. Not cooking. I think Johnny-san should've stayed in Okinawa," Chozen said quietly.

"What does that mean?" Daniel hissed.

"You met Ms. Lawrence yes?"

"Yeah."

"Got parent's permission. In Tomi village that's all you need. But you haven't asked."

"We're not even old enough to drink."

"Does not matter."

"I'm sorry Chozen I've been a bit busy fighting for my *life*. But it doesn't mean you can-"

"I will prove self a good alternative. In case. "

"You know just when I think maybe you're okay, you're a real-"

"I know," Chozen said with a grin.

He'd walked away and Daniel frowned. Utter bastard. Did he not realize he didn't have a chance? But he could make it look easy. Just coming in with plans, in their own damn apartment with the guys,

with Kumiko and Jessica.

Saturday came and Daniel didn't want to get up early. But he did. He put on the suit his mother and Ms. Lawrence helped him pick out. It was sleek. He was surprised at how good he looked in it. The nice cufflinks he'd gotten for his birthday. Looking at Johnny in his royal blue suit.

Daniel didn't want to leave, wanted to rumple up that suit, put it on the floor, make a mess of it.

"Can't keep Jessica waiting," Johnny said gently herding him out of the apartment.

"We can be quick," Daniel said, turning at the door to look over at Johnny.

"With you, I don't ever want to be quick," Johnny said, stepping out of the apartment, locking the door.

"What about coffee?"

"We'll get coffee at the gas station."

"What about breakfast?"

"There will be food at Dutch's."

"What even is happening?"

"Pretend it's normal."

"What?"

"I'm not ruining his surprise."

Daniel groaned, following him to the car.

They picked up Jessica.

Johnny's mom came out, following her in a robe and fuzzy slippers.

She leaned over and kissed Johnny on the top of his head.

"You all have fun okay?"

"Daniel," Jessica said leaning forward whispering. "Do it!"

"What?"

"Call her by her name."

"No."

"Daniel do it."

"I can't."

"Hurry Daniel. Like a band-aid. Rip it off."

Daniel sighed, sitting up a little straighter.

"Thank you, Laura, I hope you have a good day too."

He felt like his heart was in his throat. Like he was going to be sick. He couldn't believe he'd said that.

She smiled and walked over to his side, leaning down slowly.

She was going to threaten him.

She was going to slap him.

He was dead.

She'd take Johnny back.

She'd-

She kissed the top of his head.

"Told you that suit looks good on you, have fun, Daniel."

Johnny was smiling, driving off, waving goodbye to his mom as Jessica burst out laughing. "Told you!"

"She-she was okay with it!"

"Told you," Johnny said.

"But why didn't she-"

"She said she never told you you had to call her by Ms. Lawrence," Johnny said.

"Oh that's evil and cool as hell," Jessica said. "Your mom is awesome Johnny."

"She is," he said with a smile.

Daniel sat stunned through the drive, through Johnny hopping out to buy coffee with Jessica, until they rolled up to Dutch's house and walked in through the front door.

It was a set of doors he'd never been through before and he was shocked out of his stupor.

Sid's mansion had been gaudy and rich, Jimmy's mansion was like a normal home but bigger, too big but all the space was used comfortably, Dutch's home was elegant but also *rich* rich.

The floor was marble, there was a spiral staircase at the entrance, behind which was a painting of Dutch sitting with his parents and Mr. and Mrs. P.

"Holy shit," Jessica said.

"Right?" Bobby asked quickly taking some of the coffee. "Wait till you walk through the hallway. That was a trip."

Daniel followed them down the hall, holding Johnny's hand.

It was a long hallway with paintings on the walls.

People Daniel didn't know, and then he recognized Mr. and Mrs. Dutch.

They weren't smiling, stiff for several paintings, just getting a little bit older, a little differently dressed, and then they were holding a baby and Daniel watched each painting as that kid and his parents got older until there were different paintings.

Dutch was on his own for a lot of them on one side of the hall and then he stopped suddenly.

Johnny was in the painting.

"You know how some families do like photoshoots? Christmas cards and shit?" Bobby asked.

"Yeah?"

"The Dutch's do paintings. Gigantic fucking paintings. And until this year the only guest has been Johnny."

He had always thought Johnny was gorgeous, but in a painting he was stunning.

"Daniel I had a feeling you'd get stuck here," Dutch said taking his coffee from Johnny. "But I gotta ask you to stare and appreciate Johnny later. My parents aren't very superstitious except in one avenue and that's upsetting artists."

"What?" Daniel asked moving, dragging his eyes away from the painting.

"My mom read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a kid and it freaked her out. She thought artists could trap your soul in paintings, and like she knows it's not really a thing, but it means she's still cautious around them. And it means one of the big rules is not to piss them off and thus not leave them waiting," Dutch said.

"Why didn't she switch over to photographs then?" Daniel asked.

"Didn't want to put an end to traditions," Dutch said with a shrug.

They walked into a big room where the rest of Tommy and Jimmy were, sitting at a big table eating breakfast.

"But eat first and remember it's going to be a lot of sitting still, hope you're ready," Dutch said, slapping Daniel's back. "Look they did remember coffee!"

"Hell yeah!"

"Thank god."

They sat down, eating pancakes, eggs, sausage, bacon, hashbrowns and muffins.

It was like a holiday at the LaRusso's. Where the food was just overflowing. That usually was when there were tons of cousins and aunts and uncles around. But this, it felt like too much for the seven of them. Everything was delicious though and the guys were asking Dutch questions.

"How long do the paintings usually take?"

"Hours.

"How'd you sit through it as a kid?"

"Mom told me if I didn't the painter would steal my soul."

"Shit Dutch that's fucking terrifying."

"Right?"

They moved into the conservatory where the artist was setting up her tools.

She glanced at them when they came in and Dutch positioned them on the chaise lounge that'd been brought out.

Jessica sat in her dress that she'd told them Laura and Daniel's mom had helped her pick out. Laura had also gotten up early to help her with her hair and makeup and she just was beaming.

"Your moms are so nice."

Dutch put his hands on Daniel's shoulders moving him to sit, totally focused, fixing Daniel's tie moving the guys around.

"So we gotta be quiet for this whole thing or?" Jimmy asked sitting down on the floor.

"Nah, we can talk," Dutch said. "Just you gotta perfect not moving."

"Oh thank god."

"Couldn't handle shutting up for a couple of hours?" Dutch asked with a laugh sitting Johnny down next to Daniel, stepping back, studying them, then stepping in again taking Daniel's right hand and putting it in Johnny's left. "You guys going to be okay like that?"

"Yeah," Johnny said looking at Daniel who nodded.

"Perfect, everyone comfortable?" Dutch asked taking his spot in the middle.

"Yup."

"Good to go."

It was long.

They talked a lot.

He heard the artist who looked very serious laugh a couple of times.

They heard all about the adventures Jessica had been having at Laura's. Apparently, Abuela had come over with Gabriella and had made dinner, had asked her about school.

Jessica was shocked they'd remembered her. Shocked everyone had. But it'd been nice.

Mrs. LaRusso came by often, after work and they'd have dinner together talking about the day and about Mrs. LaRusso's new coworkers.

She went out with Kumiko and Ali a lot too.

They'd go on drives, they took Kumiko to the Getty, several other museums. She'd seen her aunt a couple of times and made a few things at the shop and it'd felt like told times.

The guys started planning their next adventure, trying to think of cool places to take her and Kumiko.

"We're going to Newark in a couple of weeks," Johnny said.

"Shit really? For what?"

"Nonnio's birthday," Johnny said.

"Whose Nonnio?" Jessica asked.

"Daniel's grandfather."

"Wait, so is this a whole family deal?" Bobby asked.

"Yeah," Daniel said. "We're flying out with my mom."

"You guys mind keeping an eye on Mr. Miyagi and everyone for us?" Johnny asked.

"Of course, not a problem."

"Want us to babysit the bonsai?"

"Chozen offered," Johnny started.

Daniel tightened his hand around Johnny's.

Damnit Chozen.

"But Mr. Miyagi's got it."

Daniel relaxed.

Of course, Johnny wouldn't leave his bonsai with Chozen. Chozen had trashed Mr. Miyagi's garden in Okinawa. The guys would be picked over Chozen any day.

The bonsai was in their room, and before they'd leave for the day Johnny would move it into the living room.

He'd asked Daniel if he wanted him to do the same with *his* bonsai and now every day, when they left and came home from work Johnny, would carry both bonsai about the house.

He'd seemed so pleased when Daniel had said yes. Like his bonsai now had a friend. It was cute.

He'd also started a miniature garden on the balcony. Fresh herbs were growing that when they got back from Newark Daniel couldn't wait to use in his cooking.

He knew the bonsai were supposed to go to Mr. Miyagi.

Johnny had asked about it, like he was dropping them off with their granddad before their trip. But Chozen was sneaky.

"Oh, want to know what Daniel did today?" Jessica asked, excitement in her voice.

"What?"

"He called Ms. Lawrence by her first name."

"No way."

"How'd she react?"

"She kissed the top of his head. It was very sweet. But he looked like he was going to faint."

"She's intimidating!" Daniel said.

"Dude, she's like Johnny. If she hated you you'd know."

"What do you mean?"

"She'd destroy you. You'd be gone man."

"That doesn't make me feel better!"

Bobby laughed. "Be nice. What he means Daniel is that she's kind of like Johnny she can be intimidating but she shows you she likes you through actions and spending time with you. I don't know how she has enough time for it all. I mean we've been talking and hell, she's at my house playing games with my little siblings and having take out with my family, she sent all of us care packages while we've been at college. I've had lunch with her since I've come back, from what I've heard she takes Dutch out to dinner frequently, I'm sure there's more."

"She sent me flowers after my debate that got me on the student council," Tommy said. "And I mentioned off hand that my roommate leaves my room freezing and she sent me a blanket."

"She brings me coffee or tea when I'm at the firm," Jimmy said.

"In otherwords Daniel just think about it, do you see her a lot or not at all?" Dutch asked.

Johnny's thumb swiped over the back of his knuckles, a quick comforting movement.

He did see her a lot, nearly once a week or more.

At least a couple times a month he was invited to join her and Johnny for dinner at her place. Now that his mom was in town the next one was going to be all four of them.

She took him mattress shopping.

Helped him pick out a suit.

He thought of all the brunch and cafe meet ups.

"Lawrences seem to just show up in your life when they like you and make themselves comfortable if you let them," Bobby said. "And if you hurt someone they love they will bury you."

Daniel gently squeezed Johnny's hand.

He liked spending time with Johnny's mom. He'd kind of thought she'd been doing it all for his mom though, looking after him for her. But

maybe she liked him. Approved of him and that felt good. That she liked Daniel for Daniel and liked him with Johnny.

He'd tell his Nonnia and Nonnio when he got home. When they asked how things were going. He got the guy and the parents approval.

Maybe...maybe Chozen was right. Ugh, gross.

He glanced down quickly at Johnny's hand in his. He'd start thinking about it. It was probably too early.

But his dad had told him when he was little that he'd known on the first date that his mom was the one.

It'd been a windy day and he'd lost his hat, some dorky thing he thought was cool at the time and she'd taken off her heels and chased after it, managed to get it after nearly crashing into a whole bunch of dogs and their dog walker. She'd brought it back to where he stood holding her high heels and she'd dusted it off and put it back on his head telling him it made him look handsome. They'd ended up having pie together that she'd made and brought with her in the park and just talked for hours. She laughed at all his bad jokes and she had her own that made him laugh. He couldn't stop thinking about her, came up with excuses to swing by where she was. She told Daniel that she'd kept cooking and baking things, finding her own excuses to see him. Would make him lunch.

There'd been a day where they'd ended up having the same excuse. Had made each other lunch, and laughed, sitting together with their sandwiches and pasta. They'd found their best friend in the whole world and Daniel had always wondered about that, what that felt like, but now he thought he understood.

Returning to Newark

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny was looking at his bag with a frown. Daniel had already packed and was talking from the other room about food, trying to guess what Mr. Miyagi was making for dinner.

Fish. Had to be fish right? There was like an unwritten rule that 87% of the time if Mr. Miyagi was cooking it was fish. It was good fish but they'd collectively eaten a small aquarium's worth of fish since summer and Daniel was ready for pasta and risotto.

What did one pack when they were going to their boyfriend's grandfather's birthday where the whole family would be there?

Did people usually meet extended family after seven-ish months of dating?

They probably didn't usually move in together, so maybe the ruler people measured their relationships with was already thrown out the window.

It was going to be cold, right?

Newark in January had to be cold.

Daniel had mentioned snow. Lots of snow.

But how much?

More than the mountains?

Did Johnny pack his snowboarding gear? That was a snowsuit.

He doubted people in Newark wore snowsuits to just get around.

He'd dragged out his brown winter jacket and his sweaters. The one Nonnia had made was already in his bag. So far it was the only thing in there.

What books was he going to take?

Would it be rude to take too many?

It'd be nearly a six-hour flight, but Mrs...Lucille was going with them.

Surely he'd be expected to be a good conversation companion then.

What was he going to sleep in?

They were staying with Daniel's godfathers who Johnny had never met.

He was going to meet people important to Daniel.

He had to make a good impression.

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed, looking over at the two bonsai sitting on their shelf.

"Help," he said softly.

His mother had had him over for dinner the night before, Jessica was out with the guys so it was just the two of them and most of the dinner was talking about the trip to Newark.

A reminder of being polite that wasn't needed because Johnny knew as soon as he walked into a room full of people he didn't know he'd revert back to his country club charm mixed with the jump when told obedience Kreese had instilled. As much as it all sucked at least it let him coast through big events.

"It's a big deal," Laura had said.

"I know," Johnny said.

"You get along with Lucille and Daniel's grandparents. But getting along with *all* the in-laws will require work. And people talk. You've got the important people in your corner, but there might be people like Louie Jr. who will give you shit, or who might not like you. So here's what I want you to do. You remember what I told you when you were little?"

Johnny frowned. "Run into a shop and find an adult?"

"Yes, your adult this time is Daniel."

Johnny laughed.

"I'm not joking, If someone gives you shit you diffuse the situation and when you find a polite and private opening you tell Daniel. You do

not let it fester. Dutch said that you daydream about being with Daniel until well into your 70's. If you want to get there you can't let his family be rude or mean to you. You be polite and charming to them and if there's anything bad you tell Daniel so it can get nipped in the bud."

Knowing Dutch gossiped about him and Daniel with his mom was a weird realization. He didn't know how he felt about it.

"But mom-"

"No but mom me, I'm serious Johnny. If they're shitty to you and Daniel does nothing then one I'll be shocked, and two I'll be pissed. It's his family. Think about it this way okay. Let's say I was still married to Sid and Sid was a dick to Daniel what would you do?"

Johnny frowned.

He normally avoided Sid.

Hid from him when he could.

If he'd have brought Daniel home and Sid had been rude or had hurt Daniel- he felt a little sick to his stomach.

"Hey, *hey*, okay bad example. Sid's a shitty example. No one in Daniel's life is like him, at least in his family. The point I want to make is that-okay Silver, right? You kicked Silver to the curb because he hurt Daniel. You'd do the same to anyone blood or not, right? Put them in their place? Like the guys?"

Johnny nodded.

"So that's gotta go both ways honey. If he doesn't stick up for you with his family then those 60 years you're daydreaming of are going to be hell several times a year. So what do you do if someone's a dick to you?"

"Diffuse and tell Daniel," Johnny mumbled. It felt silly.

"If you don't diffuse it, if you tackle it head-on then it could create more sparks. If you feel like you'll get physically hurt defend yourself, but I want you to get out of the situation as fast as possible and somewhere safer. I'm hoping it doesn't happen, that they all see how wonderful you are but because of your history and because of what you told me about Louie Jr. There's always a chance. I just want you

to be prepared."

He knew she'd meant well but now he was nervous, nervous about making sure he made the best first impression he could.

He heard the door open and Daniel looked at him for a moment then at the empty bag.

"Are you thinking of just being nude all weekend?"

"No."

"I was going to say I wouldn't complain if it wasn't a family thing. Maybe before I start school we can get the guys to cover for a week and just be nudists. Lock the door and barricade ourselves in."

A full week? Never going to happen. A day maybe, a full weekend might be pushing it.

"I don't know what to pack."

"Can I help?"

"Please."

Daniel smiled going to their closet and pulling out warm sweaters, warm shirts that Johnny usually wore to the lodge.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you're stuck, this is going to be your first *real* winter right? You're a sunny California guy. Wait. This is seriously your warmest jacket?" Daniel asked pausing on that brown coat.

"Yeah."

"We got to get you a warmer jacket. Actually, Jessica will still be here when we get back, think you could fit into her puffer jacket?"

"The pink one?" Johnny asked with a frown. "I think it'd be too small for me."

"We are just going to have to get you a warmer jacket when we get to Newark," Daniel said with a sigh. "But you're going to freeze as soon as we get there and the thing is you're not going to complain because you never do, your fingers are going to get frostbitten and fall off before you complain and then I'm going to freak out and you won't have said a word- are you sure you can't just *try* Jessica's pink puffy

jacket on? I'm sure she'll be fine without it and I'm sure she's around. Like if I call Dutch or Mr. Miyagi I'm sure they'll let me know where she is and then just like that you can at least try it on."

"Will it help if I tell you beforehand that my fingers are cold?"

"Do you own gloves?"

"Bike gloves."

"You mean those little fingerless things? Johnny those won't protect your hands from a Newark winter! I should've taken you shopping before now, you think something is still open? Where do you buy winter clothes in LA?"

"Daniel, it'll be fine, if I need something I'll buy it when I get there."

Daniel laughed, turning to Johnny and cupping the sides of his face. "This isn't going to be the mountains, you're going to be walking down the street and it's going to be slippery and suddenly gravity is your enemy. Winter in Newark is a different beast."

"Won't we be inside with your family most of the time?" Johnny asked hooking his arm around Daniel's waist pulling him closer.

"We will, but I get sent on errands all the time. You gotta be a parent or volunteer to watch the younger cousins if you want to get out of last-minute grocery shopping. Plus Nonnia likes to do these day-long trips. Ma thinks there's going to be a shopping day."

"I don't mind watching kids."

Daniel blinked, like he forgot at least twice a week Johnny babysat in the evenings.

"You don't know *these* kids."

"I can handle kids."

"The little ones barely like *me*."

Johnny smiled kissing the top of Daniel's head.

"They're missing out. Now, what else do I need to pack?"

Daniel frowned looking at the suitcase.

"More clothes."

Johnny nodded pulling away and going through drawers putting clothes into the bag, Daniel sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"What else should we take?" Johnny asked.

"Just ourselves."

"What about a gift?"

"Not necessary."

Johnny liked having something. A gift. Something for Daniel's godfathers, for his grandfather and grandmother. It felt rude to not take anything.

"Not even for your godfathers?"

"Nope."

"I usually...it's a bit weird for me to take nothing. Feels weird I mean," Johnny said as he put a few more books in his bag

Daniel reached out taking his hand in his. "All you need is you."

They took the Avanti to Mr. Miyagi's, their bags in the backseat with their bonsai for Mr. Miyagi to babysit while they were gone. It felt a little weird to be leaving while all their friends were visiting, but they were all still going to be there when they got back. Plus the guys had promised multiple times that they'd make sure everyone had fun. They'd already made a long list of things to do with Jessica, Kumiko, Yukie, and Sato, and said it was fine if Chozen tagged along.

That was when they weren't fighting with Ali. Ali seemed to be swooping in frequently to hang out with Jessica and Kumiko and Mr. Miyagi had things planned too.

They were lucky they'd get to see their friends at all, with how much their time in LA was being fought over.

The guest house had been converted into space for Kumiko and Yukie to sleep almost as soon as Daniel and Johnny had moved out. Johnny had a feeling it was going to stay that way. Sato and Chozen slept in Mr. Miyagi's room.

Johnny wondered if the guys could build another guest room so Mr. Miyagi could have his own space again. Or so Yukie could stay with him. He was pretty sure they both wanted to marry. So why not? He didn't understand what was blocking their way. The late Mrs. Miyagi? Years of being apart? Sato?

They'd set up dinner in the garden.

Kumiko was laughing and Chozen had a sour look on his face.

"Miyagi carry," Mr. Miyagi said following Sato, reaching for what Sato was carrying.

"No no, I got," Sato said moving out of the way and out into the garden carrying plates with dinner.

Yukie walked past a playful smile on her lips carrying a large bowl.

Mr. Miyagi turned, realized she was carrying the last of the food.

"Miygai help."

"No no Miyagi sensei. Miyagi cook, you're all done," Yukie said with a warm smile, setting the bowl down on the table.

Johnny set the bonsai down safely next to some of Mr. Miyagi's bonsai at the edge of the garden.

"What is it?" Kumiko asked.

"Miyagi live in Hawaii before California. Boys ask what I remember how to cook. Thought tonight would be good night. Friend teach Miyagi. Pork and taro leaves, cook for hours so becomes soft, smoked," Mr. Miyagi explained as Sato put food on everyone's plate while Johnny and Daniel took their seats at the table.

"It looks good, thank you Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said.

"You excited to go to Newark?" Kumiko asked.

"I am," Daniel said. "I haven't seen all of my family in a while. We couldn't afford to go back last year and we were a bit busy, so it'll be nice to go this year."

"How about you Johnny?"

Nervous.

He was super nervous.

He was expecting a whole bunch of Louie Jr.'s and to hide somewhere with Nonnia and Nonnio. But it would be nice to see Daniel's family, the people who knew him from when he was little.

"Yeah. It'll be nice to meet all the people Daniel talks about and see Nonnia and Nonnio again."

"Isn't it going to be cold?" Chozen asked.

"Yeah, and this guy doesn't have a good winter coat. Which I don't understand. He goes to the lodge every year to go skiing or snowboarding but he has a cool guy jacket and not a real winter jacket. He doesn't even have gloves. We're going to have to go shopping as soon as we land. Or maybe there'll be extras at Nonna and Nonnio's."

"Who?"

"Daniel's grandparents," Johnny said.

"Why don't you have winter things?" Chozen asked with a frown.

Johnny took a bite of the food Mr. Miyagi had made.

"It's really good Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said.

"Normally I make fish, but next time," Mr. Miyagi said with a smile.

"Sid bought most of it. I didn't want to keep it. I think it all got donated," Johnny told Chozen with a shrug. "The jacket I kept Mom bought me. So whatever I'm missing I'll get when I get there."

Daniel's hand went to his thigh, then seemed to change his mind, arms wrapping around his waist.

"Prison is too good for Sid," Chozen said sourly.

Johnny helped himself to some rice. "I prefer knowing where he is. Where they all are, and that they're stuck there. How is the dojo remodeling going?"

"Lots to do. They were half through painting. But use cheap material. We have government contract. So spend more, make nicer. Cobra gone. Swap out mirrors. Almost like dance studio. Hmm?" Sato said.

"Lot of work," Chozen said. "Uncle wants to recreate balance board." He pointed to the pond in Mr. Miyagi's garden. "Kumiko comes sometimes to help. But mostly to practice while we work."

"Kumiko dancer. Good work ethic to practice even while on break," Sato said with a nod of approval.

Kumiko grinned and Chozen frowned into his food.

"See? I'm working hard."

"Making it hard to remove mirrors. Always dancing."

"It would make a lovely dance studio," Kumiko said. "I'm surprised you don't rent out the space for classes."

"Government want karate."

"But ballet and dance are very good. Coordination, agility, balance, flexibility. Chozen, next time you should try with me. I can teach you ballet."

"Again. No...thank you."

"Johnny, would you learn ballet if I taught it?" Kumiko asked, tone syrupy sweet.

Johnny thought about his schedule. When they got back he was babysitting, working, volunteering, and he was planning to take Daniel to school a couple of times a week when the semester started. He had time.

"Sure."

Kumiko gently smacked Chozen's shoulder with the back of her hand.

"See?"

"I took dancing lessons when I was younger, for the country club and to cotillions and debutante balls. It ended up being useful when I started karate."

"What are those?" Yukie asked.

"Dances, mostly for girls. They always needed a partner to show them off. So I usually was busy the whole season."

"Rich person thing," Daniel said.

"Not always, but yeah," Johnny said.

"Sounds like you were popular," Kumiko said.

"Sort of. It was all business. I showed up, I made the girls look good, talked when spoken to, but not much, and then I left. It was mostly country club girls who Sid wanted to impress their families. I was useful."

"Don't like that," Chozen said. "Doesn't sound good."

"But I do like dancing," Johnny said. "And Kumiko is a good dancer."

"Jessica and Ali have been wanting to take lessons. I thought it could be fun."

"Well if you find time, the guys wouldn't mind joining I can assure you," Johnny said.

Kumiko smiled, "They did mention that. And I got to meet Jimmy's friend...Jennifer?"

"She's nice," Daniel said with a smile. "Dutch usually knows some good places to go dancing. He might know where you can do a lesson."

"That's a good idea. I'll ask. And then we can show off when you get back."

"What are you guys going to do while we're gone?" Daniel asked turning to Mr. Miyagi.

"Work in shop. Yukie wants to help. Very excited," Mr. Miyagi said.

"It'll be fun," Yukie said smiling warmly. "Never have gotten to work in shop before. Miyagi sensei said neighbors nice."

"Johnny befriended everyone in the neighborhood," Daniel said. "They ended up coming over before the holidays to give us things. It was really sweet. And then they came to wish me well before the tournament."

"A lot of them ended up coming to the tournament," Johnny said.

"They did?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah, they sat in a group a little away from me, near Mrs. Douglas."

"I didn't notice. I'll have to tell them thanks."

"You had to be focused."

"I will keep working on dojo with nephew," Sato said. "We also need to decide on lessons. So think we keep doing same. Work morning. Drive to Miyagi-san's shop, eat together, go back to work, then come here for dinner."

"Except tomorrow," Yukie said.

"Tomorrow? What tomorrow?" Sato asked.

"Laura-san invite me to dinner," Yukie said with a warm smile. "We go out. So tomorrow I see you late."

"Oh, that will be fun!" Kumiko said. "Ms. Lawrence knows all the best places for food. She's very fun. Jessica's been staying with her and we had a movie night. Her home is very pretty. You would like it, aunt Yukie. Lots of plants."

"I hope you have fun," Johnny said.

His mother had mentioned it. Of taking Yukie out to some nice place for dinner and showing her around while she was in town. She'd been a little cautious about it because she didn't want to take time away from Mr. Miyagi's time with Yukie. She'd hesitated for a long time, before saying screw it and calling Miyagi's to ask Yukie if she wanted to have dinner. A girl's night. She wanted to thank Yukie for taking care of Johnny in Okinawa. Wanted to get to know her and be welcoming and hope that the woman would stay, or come back often. To start that relationship so she'd be able to book tickets there or to LA.

She'd told Johnny, "Mr. Miyagi's done so much, and I appreciate that they like this long-distance relationship they have and want to keep that going, but maybe I'm a sucker for romance, but I want them to be able to see each other more often. And it's a bit weird if I start thanking them by being a stranger booking plane tickets, but I want to make sure they see each other frequently. They can't just have a relationship of calls and letters. That's so sweet but like in a melancholy way. They deserve to be happy."

She'd ranted about it for a good hour before making the call.

Johnny agreed.

He wanted them to be happy and he hoped, secretly hoped that Sato having business in Okinawa and opening the dojo would open that gate. That Mr. Miyagi would fly back with him sometimes, or Yukie would. Selfishly he wanted Yukie to move to LA. But he knew Mr. Miyagi had bought her a house before they left. He kind of wanted them to be like snowbirds. Spend their winter in Okinawa and be in LA the rest of the year. Even though it didn't get cold in LA which kind of kept them from being snowbirds.

It seemed like it'd be lonely for Yukie. But it might also be nice, he didn't know, for her to have a big old house to herself after caring for so many other people, taking care of Mr. Miyagi's father when he got sick and was dying. Maybe it'd be nice to just focus on herself. He wanted her to do what she wanted, without worrying about how to get to where she wanted to be. So he was hoping Sato would keep flying her back and forth. He didn't know if Sato would stay, or if he'd leave Chozen in charge, or if they'd both stay, or if they'd pick someone else to take over. As long as Cobra Kai was gone that was all he cared about. And it was. It wasn't his problem anymore. He'd done his part to make sure no other kids fell into the same dangerous mindset. No one would be tormented like Daniel had or he or the guys.

They ended up sleeping at Lucille's. Driving over after dinner with Mr. Miyagi, leaving the bonsai and wishing him and everyone a good night. Johnny hadn't seen her new place yet and it was kind of weird. He'd just kept thinking it was the Seven Seas place again. He kept expecting to push through the gate and to walk past the empty pool, to give the dog a treat, and climb the stairs to their apartment.

But her apartment was nice, spacious, and homey. All the familiar furniture he recognized no longer crowded into a small space. It seemed to give them new life to see it in a new light. Her living room was comfortable, the familiar couch set up in front of the familiar TV, little tchotchke's he remembered in other places set out. The glass grapes in the bowl on the coffee table that had once been on the counter in the kitchen. Family photos set out. Colorful glass orbs, little glass animals, and colorful ceramic plates almost made it feel like a treasure hunt for things he recognized but they were in new spots.

Her kitchen was big and Daniel beelined straight for the fridge, opening it and it was full. Normal stuff. Milk. Eggs. Salad fixings. Fruit.

"Is that all still going to be good when we get back?" Johnny asked softly wondering if he needed to ask the guys to swing by like locust and clear out the fridge like they apparently had last time.

"We're only going to be gone a couple of days. It should be fine," Lucille said. "But if you get hungry help yourself."

Johnny nodded, still holding his bag, feeling a little uneasy. It was weird to just follow Daniel into his bedroom/guestroom right? Like super weird? She had another guest room. What was going to happen at Daniel's godfather's place? Would Johnny sleep on the couch? Would he be able to sleep at a stranger's place? Or would he be too uneasy? Would every sound wake him up if he wasn't next to Daniel? He wished he'd packed wine or something to give as a gift.

"Our flights pretty early, you two should go to bed," Lucille said motioning towards Daniel's room, smiling warmly and gently squeezing Johnny's shoulder.

"Thank you for letting us stay over," Johnny said.

Lucille laughed softly. "I should thank you for offering to drive us to the airport."

"Goodnight."

"Sleep well you two."

Daniel's room was different than his before. It was more of a guest room than Johnny's at his mother's.

He supposed it was because most of Daniel's stuff was at their apartment.

But it was comfortable and there were things of Daniel's. Pictures. It was where his mother stored all the photo albums and Johnny picked one up with a smile watching as Daniel belatedly realized what he was doing and ran over. "Hey, let's just go to bed huh?"

Johnny held the album up, out of Daniel's reach watching as he got frustrated, determined to get it back. Reaching for it, jumping.

"Shouldn't you be introducing me to your family? Telling me what I should know?" Johnny asked.

Daniel stopped his reaching and straining and his eyes moved away

from the album to Johnny's face, he was close enough to kiss.

"You're serious? Not just trying to see embarrassing photos?"

"Sixty forty," Johnny said with a grin. "I would like a crash course in LaRusso's, but if I happen to see some cute photos of you as a kid, it'll be like a treat."

Daniel sighed, frowning. "Okay fine. You're right. But you gotta let me skip ahead of anything too embarrassing."

"Have an awkward phase?"

"Yes."

"So?"

"So?!" Daniel asked arms crossed as Johnny took a seat on the bed with the album. "Sorry, we couldn't all be pretty models who then moved on to being built like a freaking marble sculpture."

Johnny flicked the album over while Daniel sat down next to him, grumbling. Johnny sat the album aside quickly grabbing Daniel's face in his hands, startling him.

"We couldn't afford to get my hair cut very often and my mom didn't like how it looked when she cut it, she tried it once, so I rarely got it cut. I got made fun of for it all the time. But my mom would brush it out all the time to make sure it didn't tangle or anything. I hated how I looked, but mom put so much care into my hair and I knew we couldn't do anything about it. Unless I wanted to chop it off myself. If people hadn't made fun of me for it I don't think I'd have noticed or cared. And one day I'm going to get old and I'm going to get wrinkly and I'm sure I won't be as you say *made out of marble* forever. Anything could happen. I've seen pictures of you as a kid. You were cute. And here's the thing Daniel, you were a kid. Kids are kids. How they look is like kids. But you now, you in the future, no matter what I'm sure you're going to be the hottest guy around. You're already beautiful."

Johnny let go of his face and tapped the middle of Daniel's forehead with the tip of his index finger.

"We didn't know each other before, and I hear stories all the time of your life in Newark. These are the best ways to get to see them. To see the Daniel that was that became the Daniel I love. The building blocks

that were there. I want to see it. To look for *my* Daniel in the face of young Daniel, see if your smile is the same, or if you talked with your hands the same way, because I can't time travel, this is the closest I can get. And I want to see all these people who you love and who loved you who I'm going to meet so that I can feel more prepared."

Daniel blinked at him, and looked away, blushing. "You're going to still be a hot old guy."

"You missed my whole point didn't you?" Johnny asked picking the album up and setting it on his lap.

"I didn't," Daniel said kissing him gently on the cheek. "Though now I have to ask your mom about your long hair."

Johnny felt Daniel's hand trail up his back, along his neck, and settle on the back of his head, fingers in his hair.

"Are you going to grow it out long again? You could you know."

Johnny frowned flicking to the first page of photos. He didn't know. They'd been a bit busy. It was getting a bit too long but was in an awkward phase. He couldn't tie it up yet.

He looked at holiday photos, summer trips to some lake, swimming in the local pool, a picnic. There were a lot of people. It took a while, but eventually, he'd was able to pick out Lucille and nearby somewhere he was pretty sure he could tell which one was Daniel.

"Okay, so whose important?" Johnny asked.

Daniel laughed, leaning over his shoulder.

"They would hate that question. But yeah, there's so many I get it," he said pointing to different small faces on the photograph.

This one aunt was married to this uncle and these were their kids. It went on and on, some were divorced. Some never had married. Some had. They flipped through the pages carefully and Johnny tried to remember tidbits, tried to remember who was who as they moved forward in time. As the kids grew up.

It really was a big family.

"Hey," Daniel said softly, voice in his ear different from before. Gentler. "You don't have to study or worry. You don't have to do this

again."

"Again?" Johnny asked confused.

Daniel took the photo album from him.

"Stay up all night studying. You don't have to study at all. We know there's a lot of us. You don't have to like memorize names or whatever. They're going to like you because I love you and if not then they'll have to face me."

He was serious. Concerned.

"Okinawa," Daniel explained, carefully closing the book and putting it back on the shelf. "You don't need to do any of that, just get ready for bed and come to bed with me."

There was that flirty tone. The kind that Johnny knew was dangerous.

He kissed Daniel quickly, a fast peck before gathering up his stuff to get ready for bed, brush his teeth, and shower away the day of working in the shop.

When he came back Daniel was still up. Cozy in his bed, waiting. It was like a trap. One he knew. One he would willingly walk into.

What would their whole trip be like?

Boundaries and niceties weren't really one of Daniel's concerns.

Johnny flicked off the light, waited a moment for his eyes to adjust, and walked over to the bed, arms finding him fast and pulling him in. A nightmare if it was anyone other than Daniel, if it wasn't a familiar touch, a familiar warmth, and familiar lips.

Johnny started to wonder why he bothered dressing anymore. Clothes to sleep in seemed to be a waste of time. A formality. He'd forgotten about it when he woke up to the alarm they'd set, all tangled up against one another and he hoped Daniel's mother wasn't the kind to make sure they were getting up. To just throw the door open.

"See? That's a better way to spend an evening," Daniel said stretching and pressing his nose against Johnny's neck. "Better than staying up all night looking at old photos. You actually slept. I slept well."

He was right, but Johnny felt the nervousness curl back around him. It was a lot of people. A lot of people he didn't know. He was trained in knowing. Sid had the staff quiz him. Mundane shit about dull people who Sid deemed important. Ever since his first week at the mansion. It felt like a weakness to go in somewhere blind.

He wanted to rally, to find that fire, that desire to be so pissed at everything all the time. To mold it and turn it into a desire to be even better, to be so perfect that no one could find fault, but he knew it was impossible and he knew he was going to get up, get dressed, and then fly to a family he didn't know and sit under a microscope to be picked apart.

He'd rather just stay in bed next to Daniel. But then they'd be late.

"Yeah but now I don't want to go."

Daniel hummed an agreement into his skin and Johnny leaned over and kissed Daniel before getting up and getting dressed.

Breakfast was made by Lucille, she was already up, her bags packed by the door and she smiled squeezing Johnny's arm as she passed and kissing his cheek. "Morning Johnny, help yourself."

She'd made scrambled eggs and bacon and blueberry muffins. Johnny sat down, eating when she told him again not to wait while she and Daniel finished their planning. Until they checked and double-checked they had everything and piled it into the back of the Avanti.

It was becoming a frequent habit to drive to LAX.

Johnny hadn't been there so much in his life.

Sure he'd seen his mother off, but often Sid told him to say his goodbyes at home.

Johnny wondered if he was scared Johnny would make a scene.

Maybe he should've. When he was young. Maybe he should've cried at the terminal to not be left behind. For Sid to not take his mother with him. His mother's heart would've broken and Sid would've made sure Johnny knew not to ever do that again. But for a moment it might've forced Sid's hand. Societal niceties.

Johnny tried to carry the LaRusso's bags but they swatted at his hands. So he followed after with his own bag to the ticket counter and off

towards their gate. Sitting and listening to them talk. He waited for a lull, turning to Daniel.

"Did you tell her?"

The words on Daniel's tongue died as he looked at Johnny.

"Huh?"

"Tell me what?"

"Your plans when we get back?"

Daniel had told him to remind him to tell her. Had packed all these brochures to tell her about his plans. Planning to tell his family as well.

"Oh! Oh right!" Daniel said turning and digging out the brochures, handing them over to his mom. "I'm signed up for classes next semester. I've also gotten into an apprenticeship."

"Apprenticeship?" Lucille asked looking at the brochure, brow furrowed.

"Yeah, so I'll be a part-time student on a business track and then I'll be studying mechanics the other days of the week."

She looked down at the brochures and then up at Daniel, "Really?"

"Yeah, Ma."

"And you want to?"

"I do."

She threw her arms around his shoulders. "It sounds like a lot of work. I'm very proud of you-" She pulled back all of a sudden and looked at Daniel again and then at Johnny. "What about the shop?"

"I'll still be there helping Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said.

"Is that going to be okay? Just the two of you? It's a busy shop." She sat back face steeling into a frown. "Daniel you can't just get bored with your business and foist it on Johnny."

"Ma! That's not-"

"I like working in the shop," Johnny said.

"What if you want to do something else?"

"Then I'll figure something out then," Johnny said. "But I don't want to go to school. Maybe that will change later but I like working with Mr. Miyagi."

She pursed her lips like she wasn't pleased but didn't have any arguments.

"I'm still going to be working at the shop," Daniel said. "Just not as much."

Lucille had no arguments for Johnny but had arguments aplenty for Daniel. Arguments that went in circles about Daniel and his responsibilities.

The flight attendant handed Johnny his snack and two for the arguing LaRusso's.

"Are they okay?"

"Yeah. I'll get these to them, thanks."

The attendant nodded and Johnny turned passing the snacks to them. The arguing stopped momentarily to thank Johnny before continuing.

Johnny didn't know what the flight would be like. He thought it'd be about what they were going to do. About Newark. Not a practically six-hour flight of

You spent all your money for school on that shop and now that you're bored you're going to leave it to Mr. Miyagi and Johnny and not going to take care of it or the bonsai while it's a busy shop and you're going to go work on cars instead. How is that helpful or useful? You're abandoning them!

Followed by Daniel's

"I'm not abandoning them Ma, I'm studying business that's going to help me run my business and I'm doing the apprenticeship because I like cars. I'm following a dream. And I can. And that's a good thing right?"

Johnny had tried to tell Lucille that he and Mr. Miyagi knew about it. That Daniel had talked to them about it. And it was fine. But she

stopped him and patted his hand, squeezed it, and then went back to the never-ending argument that was exactly the same. Johnny moved on after an hour of realizing they weren't going to find a solution or an end to the argument to his book.

He'd finished it by the time they landed, by the time the argument had fizzled into quiet sulking.

He didn't get it. But Daniel had shifted closer to him. Arm through his. Frustrated and childishly stubborn. They were quiet as they headed out to get their bags. Quiet as they walked to find their ride, Johnny hoping fervently it was anyone but Louie Jr. Pretty sure that while Daniel had allowed Louie Jr. to pick them up Lucille wouldn't allow it.

Johnny slowed down, he didn't know why he was leading the way. He didn't know who they were meeting or where they were going. Well, he knew ultimately where they were going but it wasn't like he could walk up to a taxi driver and say *LaRusso's house. Nonnio and Nonnia's house please in Newark.* They'd ask if he needed to call his mom or something. Think he ran away from home.

They caught up and Johnny looked at the faces of all the strangers wondering which strangers were their strangers. A man stood with a big smile and a wave. Lucille hugged the man. That was their stranger.

Johnny started to slow more. It had to be one of Daniel's godfathers.

He should've brought something.

A gift.

His palms were sweating.

The guy was laughing and pulling Daniel into a hug messing up his hair.

Johnny rubbed his palm against his jeans.

"Hello, I'm Johnny," Johnny said holding out his hand.

He'd never cared before he realized.

He could be charming at the country club hungover, high, bruised, and battered, with ease because he didn't care.

But now he cared a lot. Too much.

He'd already known Ali's parents so it'd been easy. Nonnia and Nonnio had been easy because he hadn't tried because he and Daniel weren't dating. But now...now he was so incredibly nervous. More nervous than the first time he'd showed up on Lucille's front step. More than every study date. He wanted to turn around and get back on a plane.

He wasn't ready. He wasn't at his A-game. It was going to crash and burn and-

The guy grabbed his hand, pulling him into a hug. "Yeah, you are! I've heard so much about you. I think I could pick you out of any crowd between what Lucille, Daniel, Nonnia, Nonnio have said," he laughed.

He smelled like mints and the cold.

"I'm Moshe," he said hand on Johnny's back a hearty pat. "Nice to finally meet you. We tried to get Daniel to bring you over last time, but we got a little overwhelmed reading his Dad's letter that we'd held onto for him and well, we wanted to meet you when we weren't all sobbing. Tristen's with the car so you'll meet him soon. Oh shit, is this your warmest jacket Johnny?" Moshe asked stepping back and taking Johnny in, fingers on the hem of the jacket.

"We have to get him some warm winter clothes. He doesn't even have a hat or gloves." Daniel said.

"Well you're just going to have to share," Moshe said.

"Huh?"

"You wear one glove, give him the other, and then hold hands," Moshe said. "It'll get you through until we get you to a store."

Daniel dug around in the pockets of his orange puffer jacket and handed Johnny a glove.

Johnny put it on, taking Daniel's bare hand in his own.

"You all ready? Brace yourself Johnny, East coast winters are something else," Moshe said.

There was a bitter wind as soon as they stepped out. It was like getting sucker-punched. All the warmth leached out of him almost immediately.

He followed Moshe to an old car idling a little ways away.

Moshe opened the trunk and they put all their things next to the spare tire and emergency kit and a bag of kitty litter.

"Do you have a cat?" Johnny asked.

"It's for traction on ice," Moshe said shutting the trunk once all their bags were in.

Daniel pulled him towards the backseat, his mother already in the warm car, leaning forward and talking to the man behind the wheel.

"Nice to meet you Johnny, I'm Tristen. Welcome back to Newark."

"Nice to meet you too," Johnny said putting his seatbelt on and shutting the door.

He was a bit nervous the last car ride he'd been in Newark had been pure chaos and he couldn't believe Daniel had let it happen. Hadn't just gotten out and taken over driving. But he held Daniel's hand, running his thumb absently over the back of Daniel's knuckles. There were little scars but they were fading, had healed up nicely with Mr. Miyagi's medicine and the care Johnny had put into it. Daniel had gotten annoyed with Johnny's fussing. It ended up being a frustratingly slow process because the only way it'd worked out was when Johnny had kissed him. Soft kisses didn't do it either, they had to be dizzyingly and heated and a promise of more if he let Johnny finish bandaging up his hands.

It was all that guilt. He hadn't known it then, but it was a stubborn self-flagellation. Daniel had thought he'd deserved the pain and suffering because he'd gone to Cobra Kai, because he brought all that danger into their lives.

Johnny had worked very patiently and very slowly to make sure Daniel didn't blame himself anymore for that. For Silver. For Kreese. It was hard, Johnny slipped into it sometimes himself, but Daniel always pulled him back so Johnny did the same.

Tristen drove better than Louie Jr. which wasn't a surprise. But it was a relief.

Lucille was talking about the flight, asking how the winter had been in Newark, about the weather, and Tristen and Moshe responded. It sounded cold. A freezing cold winter. It was supposed to snow that night. Lots of it.

"We got to take Johnny shopping," Moshe said when there was a lull in the weather conversation.

"Yeah?" Tristen asked.

"He's going to turn into a popsicle in that jacket."

At a stoplight Tristen's eyes flicked up to look at Johnny, to study his jacket.

"Okay,"

"I'll take him," Daniel said. "You guys don't have to. It's still that shop about 3 blocks away right?"

"That's the one. You sure?" Tristen asked.

"Yeah. It'll be fun."

"Okay. Well, how about we get you all settled in first?"

Daniel nodded gently squeezing Johnny's hand as they pulled into the neighborhood Johnny recognized and parked.

Daniel didn't let go of his hand, stubbornly holding on while Johnny got out of the car, waiting for Daniel to follow. Like he was scared one minute of cold air on Johnny's palm would freeze it. He turned, planning to get their bags only to find that Moshe already had two of them and Tristen took the third. Shutting the trunk with a smile and heading up the stairs into the building followed by Lucille.

"It'd be easier to get out of the car if you let go," Johnny said.

"I'm not going to."

"My hands not going to freeze and fall off because you let go for a minute."

"It might."

"It's not *that* cold."

"Don't tempt fate or the weather," Daniel said finally stepping out onto the sidewalk with a grin, proud of himself.

"Good job. Absolutely unnecessary, but sweet," Johnny said kissing the top of his head, shutting the door behind them as they headed up the

stairs.

"I don't want you to lose your hand or your fingers."

"It can't be that cold."

"It's below 31 so it's totally possible."

"Okay, where are we going?" Johnny asked standing in the entryway.

"Nonnio and Nonnia are there," Daniel said pointing to the door to the right. "And Moshe and Tristen are the other side."

"Convenient."

"Well, Moshe's family moved in first when my parents were young and he and my dad became good friends. When they were all, wow, my age I guess? Moshe's family bought a house in the suburbs and Moshe stayed here because it was convenient and Tristen moved in. I grew up in that one," Daniel said pointing to another door down the hall. "There's like four apartments in here and they're each about two floors?"

"Why didn't your parents move further?" Johnny asked following him through the door to Moshe and Tristen's apartment.

"Everyone they loved was here," Daniel said with a shrug. "It's one reason I didn't want to go."

Johnny squeezed his hand before loosening his grip, waiting for Daniel to let go so they could take off their jackets. Daniel started to take off the orange puffer, but still wasn't letting go. Johnny wiggled his fingers.

"I'm for sure not getting frostbite in here."

Daniel looked a little disappointed, but he let go and Johnny quickly took off his jacket and the glove, handed the glove to Daniel, and hung up his jacket next to Daniel's orange one. Then he held his hand out again.

Daniel nodded, taking his hand.

Lucille was sitting on the couch with Tristen while Moshe was coming down the stairs.

"Your bags are in your rooms."

"Moshe, Daniel's going to study business," Tristen said turning back to look at him.

Johnny felt his heart sink. The argument was going to start up again. Daniel let go of his hand.

"Ma!"

"You forgot the part where he abandons all this hard work right when it starts to pay off," Lucille said.

Moshe frowned.

"Hey," Johnny said softly. "Is there a cafe nearby where I could pick Daniel and I up some coffee? I've uh, heard this argument for over six hours."

Moshe laughed, patting him on the shoulder. "Yeah, uh, down the street."

"I'll be back," Johnny said.

Daniel wasn't paying attention, sitting down in the living room to explain the situation to Tristen and Moshe nodded, joining the group. Johnny put his jacket back on and slipped out the door, memorizing the number and then down the block in search of coffee.

Ali and the guys had gotten Johnny into coffee. Jimmy with his fancy imports and Ali with the fancy lattes she always wanted before school. He used to leave early to get them for her, to bring when she showed up to school. He'd abused it for a bit, drinking cup after cup to stay awake and not sleep in the mansion. He hadn't drunk as much since he moved in with Mr. Miyagi and now just one cup in the mornings with Daniel.

But it was a good excuse. He could go out and get coffee for Daniel and himself. He found the cafe when the bite of the cold started to get strong and ordered Daniel a cup of coffee with a dash of cream and one for himself that was a mocha. Then he walked back. Easy. And maybe at least it was nicer than sitting inside listening to Lucille wrap her head around Daniel's plans and Daniel trying to explain that he was thinking of the future and not abandoning anyone.

Sitting on the front steps was Louie Jr.

He was attempting some sort of facial hair but it looked like he hadn't

figured out what he wanted to do with it yet. There was enough space to walk around him but Johnny stopped and held out his mocha to him. Louie Jr. looked up at the coffee then followed the arm up to Johnny's face.

He frowned then looked back down.

Johnny sat down next to him, still offering him the coffee.

Louie hunched away from him.

Johnny waited. After a while, Louie took the proffered coffee.

The other coffee Johnny held carefully in his hands hoping it'd keep him warm, regretting not taking Daniel's gloves.

"Why aren't you wearing gloves or a hat?" Louie asked.

"Don't have them," Johnny said.

Louie frowned at that.

Johnny expected a rhetorical question.

Some rich kid thing? Cool California beach guy unprepared for the cold?

But he got nothing.

Silence.

And then

"Daniel going to take you to get some?"

"Yeah."

Louie sipped at the warm coffee and seemed to nod his approval of Johnny's drink choice.

"It sucks."

Johnny waited.

"That he couldn't make it."

"Yeah."

Louie nodded a stiff nod, teeth grit, jaw tense, a quick blink.

He regathered himself.

"Ma and I wouldn't have come if-"

Johnny nodded running his thumbs over the side of the cup.

"Feel guilty bein' here, not bein' there. But also relieved."

Johnny shifted Daniel's coffee in his hands and listened as Louie started and stopped, slowly letting out all the tension.

He was just a kid.

A kid Johnny had learned when he'd done the paperwork with Louie.

A kid who couldn't legally drive which made their trip to Newark the first time a million times scarier.

Why the hell had Daniel thought that was okay?

Sure Louie had his permit and Johnny thought that was the argument, but no wonder the kid drove like a nightmare.

He listened as Louie talked about how awful it was to hear his dad's coughing echoing through the house.

How it'd interrupt conversations where he, for a moment could pretend everything was fine right until he had that wracking fit of coughs and then any and all conversations were over.

Louie turned away and Johnny didn't look but could see him scrubbing at his face out of the corner of his eye.

Louie drank his coffee and sighed.

"Everyone is asking how he's doing and talking to me like he's not going to- it's all pity. *They* know he's sick. *I* know he's sick. Why do we have to talk about it? There's nothing we can do, we're not, well I mean Nonnia was a nurse, but most of us aren't. Or-like I'll be walking through the house and they'll talk about it when I'm not in the room and about how hard it is and how sad it is and I just don't want to hear it. He's not their dad. They're not- they don't know what it's like. But we're also so talkative, like asking them not to talk about it is like to ask a mouse not to like cheese. It just fucking sucks."

Johnny nodded.

It was cold in Newark and the stone steps bit through his pants, there was a cold wind that kept pushing his hair around.

It really was getting long, he'd need to book an appointment to get it cut when he got home or steal someone's hair tie.

He was sure someone would have one. It'd look weird but he felt like one of those sheepdogs that can't see because their hair grew over their eyes. He'd just been too busy to book an appointment.

Louie sighed, a deep sigh, drinking the rest of Johnny's coffee and standing up. "I'm going back in. Thanks."

"Of course," Johnny said.

He got in and followed Louie Jr. through the door. Louie went to Nonnia and Nonnio's door and Johnny went to Moshe and Tristen's. He knocked and after a couple of minutes Daniel opened the door and looked startled.

He turned and looked around the room.

"When did you-"

Johnny held up a coffee. "I got you a coffee. Might be cold now."

"It might be cold? You're probably freezing, get in here," Daniel said

"Whose at the door?" Lucille asked.

"Johnny."

"Johnny left?"

"Clearly Ma. Why else would he be at the door?"

"Why?"

"Apparently to get me coffee."

Daniel's warm hands went to Johnny's cheeks.

"We got to get you warmer stuff," he said pulling Johnny down into a kiss. "We'll go soon. I'm going to start with this coffee you kindly got me and then we're going to get you a warmer jacket, gloves, a scarf, and a hat, and then if you think you'll be up for it we'll go across the hall and see everyone."

"Okay," Johnny said as Daniel took the coffee from him and walked back to the couch, hand in Johnny's.

The argument seemed to have ended long ago and instead, they were on safer topics. The neighborhood, Nonnia, and Nonnio, work. Johnny relaxed into the seat next to Daniel while Daniel drank his coffee.

"Didn't you get yourself one?" Daniel asked after a while.

"Gave it away."

Daniel looked at him surprised but didn't press further. Just worried the edges of the cup until it was empty then set it down on the coffee table with a sense of finality. "I'm going to take Johnny to get a jacket now."

"Okay honey, we're going next door after you get back, for dinner."

"I remember," Daniel said standing and kissing her on the cheek before going to bundle up with his warm clothes.

Johnny waved awkwardly, putting his coat back on and following Daniel back outside.

"You okay?"

"She just won't listen," Daniel said with a sigh once they were further down the street, hand in Johnny's. "I'm- we talked about this right? Like you support it?"

"You going to school and your apprenticeship?"

"Yeah."

"Of course."

"Then why doesn't Ma? Why was she so upset when I didn't go to school and now she's pissed that I am?"

"I don't know. Did you ask?"

"Did I ask?" Daniel asked stopping suddenly like he was offended then frowning. "No. We've just been going around in circles all day."

"Try asking what changed."

Daniel sighed. "You're right. I'll talk to her later, *after* we get you

something warmer."

Johnny followed Daniel into the shop.

He hadn't been into a dimly crowded shop in a long time.

There weren't a lot of people but there was a lot of stuff.

A lot of shoes, boxes, clothes were stacked everywhere someone could look with little space to get around. Everywhere Sid sent him to get clothes was open, spacious, brightly lit, blindingly so. This was the opposite as Daniel tugged him forward through the racks till he stopped at one.

"This is usually where jackets are," he said digging around through the racks. He pulled out a few and set them on top of the screeching rack. One was neon.

"No," Johnny said putting it back. "No neon."

"What? You'd be so easy to find."

"Aren't I already easy to find?"

"No. You disappear without me even realizing it."

"I came back. With coffee."

"Yes, very sweet. But I can't believe every time we come to the east coast you just disappear without me realizing it."

"Sorry," Johnny said. "I just... you and your mom argued for the whole flight. It's a six-hour flight. I think I've heard every iteration of that argument. I didn't want to listen to it again."

Daniel sighed holding up a pink puffer like Jessica's. "You and Jessica could match!"

"No," Johnny said putting it back.

"Oh, this one's yellow."

"That one's too short," Johnny said. "It's for tiny people, short people with short torsos."

"Okay, okay, how about this one?"

It was blue. Cobalt. It didn't assault his eyes to look at.

"I'll try it."

"Yeah?"

Johnny took it and put it on. It did fit.

"Okay so is this going to be warm enough?"

Daniel ran his hands over Johnny's arms, testing the fabric.

"Lift your arms."

Johnny lifted them, stretching and Daniel felt around the jacket, hands running down his chest. No one had ever tested clothing that way in Johnny's life. He somehow doubted it was an actual normal way, not with the way Daniel's fingers dug in, the way his hands squeezed.

"It *looks* warm enough. Now we just need a scarf, hat, and gloves. Maybe some ear muffs."

Johnny wanted to protest but he was pulled along to the next section, to look at the accessories. Warm waterproof black gloves were put in his hands.

"Make sure your hands can fit."

Daniel was on a mission. He had a checklist and he was going to go through it.

Johnny unzipped and unbuttoned the cobalt blue jacket.

Trying on the gloves that fit while Daniel picked out hats to plop onto his head, chewing on his lip with a frown. Lost in thought and focused. Any second and he'd start talking, mile a minute about whatever he was thinking. Johnny just had to wait.

It wasn't like he hadn't bought winter clothes before. He had for their ski trips to the lodge. He'd gotten nice winter jackets and hats and scarves. Expensive things that he just wasn't interested in keeping. He hadn't thought about keeping it when they sold all of Sid's stuff and bulldozed the house. He was pretty sure it'd all been donated to people who needed it. Johnny had liked that. That some kid somewhere who lived somewhere cold would have not just warm stuff but *nice* warm stuff. He just hadn't realized he was going to be a guy

in need of it in a couple of months. He hadn't even thought of it.

He'd been too overwhelmed in the mansion to think to really grab anything for himself that had been useful. He'd had his bonsai, his book on flowers, his walkman and that was all he needed. He didn't want anything else. The other stuff only survived and made it home with him because of Daniel and the rest of them. He'd not even spared a second thought to his jacket until he'd gotten it from Daniel. He'd cared about it, liked it but in the moment he needed something else to focus on.

He supposed it was fine as Daniel found a ski hat that matched, and a scarf. Blues and black.

"So this works?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah, they don't have any good ear muffs," Daniel said. "But I think if you tug the hat down it should keep you warm enough. Okay, do you want to look and see if you like it?"

Johnny dipped his head down to look at the mirror Daniel was motioning to, there was a pompom on the top of the hat.

He laughed. "Yeah, it's fine."

His mom would appreciate it when he told her. He walked up to the counter with the puffy coat in his arm and the scarf, glove, and hat.

"I'll buy it," Daniel said quickly pulling out his wallet.

"I can buy winter stuff. I have money again."

"I want to," Daniel said.

"Is this because your mom thinks your abandoning Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees?"

Daniel frowned.

"No."

There was a tightness to his voice. He took a deep breath, turning to Johnny.

"No. There are multiple parts to it. One, I invited you here and I should've checked. Two, we're doing good with Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees. Trees are practically flying off the shelves. And that's you. Mr.

Miyagi is great with the trees, I'm great with keeping us organized and the books. But you, you talked us up to the neighbors, got Tommy to come and get the newspaper or that magazine to run the spotlight and you cleaned the place top to bottom. You go get the stuff we need, and people like you. I thought I'd have fun talking to people, but I find I just get pissed over stupid questions, or when they fail to call me back or lose our order. So I burn out and don't want to scare away customers. People like you. Do you know how many of those calls I get are *Is the blonde dreamboat in?* And I nearly want to close the shop every time. But they like you. And they buy stuff *because* they like you. I don't like it, and I can't keep standing around listening to people talk about you because it pisses me off. I mean I like working at Little Trees, but I need...I need to excuse myself from the situation. Otherwise, I'm going to start a fight with customers."

"Maybe you should tell your mom that."

"That I'm following my dreams and feel guilty leaving my boyfriend to the wolves at our shop because I'm afraid I'm going to get too jealous?"

"Just being honest. Like you know I didn't even realize people were-"

"I know," Daniel said running his hand through his hair with a sigh. "Which is one of the reasons I have to do this. Like I want to but I also need to let you be without like getting upset because I want to be the one to enjoy watching you work."

"Uh, sirs did you want to wear this? It'll be um $152.97."

Daniel turned to the kid working the register. "Yeah he'll wear it, please cut the tags."

Johnny flushed, "Sorry."

"It's..fine," he said cutting the tags and taking the money Daniel gave him, working out the change and handing it back. "Here you are, sir."

"Thanks," Johnny asked putting on his jacket.

"Are you sure they're not there to also see you?" the kid asked Daniel putting the receipt in his hand.

Daniel laughed while Johnny put on his gloves getting his change.

Johnny didn't know why Daniel had laughed. If he'd been a customer

he would've come often to check out Daniel. Especially on hot summer days because Daniel wore the worst clothes on those days. The best clothes.

Daniel took the scarf and wrapped it around Johnny's neck, ever so carefully. "That's sweet."

Johnny pulled Daniel close. Trying to make it as clear as possible that Daniel was taken.

"I mean the kid might be right."

"You think?"

"I mean you are what I like looking at."

"Me and the bonsai huh?"

"Yup. And I'm going to miss watching you work."

"Well," Daniel said taking the hat and pulling it down over Johnny's head, brushing long hair from his eyes. "You've got a couple of weeks before classes start."

Johnny nodded, pulling away, towards the door. "I'll make sure to enjoy it."

"What are you going to do without me?" Daniel teased.

"Savor our evenings together."

"Don't you already?"

Johnny slid his hand into Daniel's back pocket as they walked out into the street. "I mean more so."

Daniel grinned. "I look forward to seeing what the difference is."

"Well first, thank you for my winter clothes."

"Can't have you losing anything because I forgot to tell you how cold it gets up here."

"I wasn't worried, because I knew you'd keep me warm."

Daniel looked up at him surprised.

"You always do. But if you can think of a way for me to express my thanks," Johnny trailed off pointedly.

"I can think of many ways," Daniel said.

Johnny grinned as they walked back to the apartments, his brown jacket over his other arm. Maybe he'd been a little jealous. Because the kid was right. Daniel probably did draw in a crowd and he hadn't noticed. Too focused on him already to realize others were also focused. Because sometimes Daniel didn't dress professionally to work at the shop. Sometimes he wore his stupidily short shorts and jersey shirt that barely covered anything, and was practically see-through depending on the lighting on super hot days while he sat at the desk and answered phones or sold bonsai. He'd said it was one of the nice things about owning a business, you could wear what you wanted. But it was practically indecent to Johnny.

Taunting with how much skin he showed.

Torture.

Sometimes Johnny wondered if he did it on purpose. The probability was high. And it'd probably be good that Daniel was off studying because it meant that Johnny wouldn't be tempted to just scoop Daniel up like some caveman and take him home. Or worse, wait until Mr. Miyagi left for lunch or something. Which never happened because they always ate together.

He liked to try and keep things neat. There were places that were off-limits. But the shop was starting to blur. Probably because of the way Daniel would come back behind him while he was working on a bonsai and press up against him like he was innocently trying to see Johnny's plan for the bonsai. But all Johnny could think of was that warm weight and the feeling of his breath against his skin. The lips that pressed against the tip of his ear.

It was always torture. Johnny did lots of breathing exercises. He'd definitely had to go in a different direction than he'd originally planned with at least four bonsai so far. Especially if they didn't have customers and Mr. Miyagi had gone into the back. Because without failed Daniel would rest his hand on Johnny, starting at his hip somedays, or his shoulder and drag his hand over his shirt or shorts, always heading to the same point, slowly enjoying whatever twisted journey he wanted to go on while Johnny held his tiny scissors trying to remember what the bonsai in his head looked like while he

shivered and Daniel made some dumb joke about wood that he always timed with when his questioning hand found its way between his legs.

Without fail the door would open with Mr. Miyagi's wooden wind chimes, or they'd hear his footsteps come back and Daniel would jump back to talk to whoever had shown up, a mile a minute and Johnny would curl closer to the bonsai mouth dry, heart pounding and knowing his face was red and would wait, uncomfortably to calm down again.

So he was kind of relieved when Daniel said he wanted to take classes, wanted to do the apprenticeship. Because he felt like he was fucking up constantly, distracted by the way Daniel licked his lips or his thumbs after he snacked on whatever he was eating. Or the way he just moved around the space.

Johnny thought moving in together, their own space would help. And it did, but it didn't stop Johnny from wanting to put his hands on Daniel, to touch ever exposed piece of skin, flip the sign to closed, lock the door and push Daniel down somewhere.

"Are you jealous because some kid thought I was hot?" Daniel asked, tone playful, grinning and looking close at Johnny's face.

"I can't be certain it was a kid."

"What do you mean?"

"I thought Louie Jr. was older than you. Like I thought he was in his 20's, when we came to visit he was like barely 15 if that. When I first saw you, like actually saw you after we got into a fight I thought you were some punk kid. I thought you were how old Louie Jr. actually was but then you sucker-punched me and I saw red. You all age weird around here. For all, I know that kids 40," Johnny said with a frown

"So Dutch flirting with me at the club does not set off jealousy alarm bells but this does?"

"I trust Dutch. I don't trust that kid."

"Dutch told someone I was his boyfriend."

"Yeah, well has he taken you out in his fancy car?"

"I've been in the van."

"Not the van."

"I thought he only has the van," Daniel said.

"He doesn't. The van is his **first** car. It's arguably his favorite. But it's not his *date* car."

"What's his date car? Why's he have a different date car?"

"Girls thought the van was creepy. So he got a Ferrari."

"Of course he did. No, I haven't seen the Ferrari. Wait, you've seen the Ferrari?"

"Yeah. His parents didn't want him driving the van to some fancy event."

"And you went?"

"I'm the only guest they gave an okay to. Which is why I know he has five cars."

"Five?" Daniel squeaked. "What is he a prince?"

"I don't think so. I think they might have a tie to some royalty somewhere but not a clue. He doesn't like talking about that stuff."

"Seriously Johnny?"

"Yeah."

"Well now what Sid said made sense," Daniel said.

"What do you mean?" Johnny said pulling away.

"I couldn't figure out why he picked Dutch of all people to be like, *you should've dated that one*."

"You are not telling me to date Dutch," Johnny said.

"No, I'm just saying I kind of get it now."

"What does that mean?"

"It means your friends are rich and powerful and I'm not, so I get why a power-hungry monster would pick Dutch."

"I can't tell if I'm offended for myself anymore," Johnny said with a

frown, before shaking his head. "How'd we end up on this train of thought? Dutch knows I love you, that's the point okay? I know because we're good friends. Just like I know the other guys wouldn't try and steal you away either. So no jealousy. But that random person? Who knows."

"You've nothing to worry about," Daniel said stopping and kissing Johnny. "But I appreciate it," he said grinning and stepping back.

"You appreciate it?" Johnny asked confused following him back up the steps.

"I get jealous all the time. You never seem to. I was beginning to think either you weren't human or something was wrong with me."

"No comment."

"Hey!"

"I plead the fifth."

"I have ways of making you talk."

"Like to see you try."

Daniel pushed the door to Moshe and Tristen's open and hung up his jacket.

"Oh, that looks very nice!" Lucille said.

"Thank you," Johnny said, taking everything and hanging it up.

"Warmer right?"

"Much."

He sat down on the couch with everyone. They ended up falling into the argument again and Johnny pressed his thigh against Daniel's, a gentle reminder he hoped and Daniel pivoted.

"Ma, you wanted me to go to school, why are you upset now that I am?"

She looked startled the words on her lips stopping. "It's not that you're going to school. It's the timing. I feel like you *just* opened your shop, *just* got rid of Silver and Cobra Kai, and now I'm worried okay? I just want you to be safe and I was going to worry about school but I guess

I kind of figured Johnny would've gone with you or the guys or something. But with the shop Johnny and Mr. Miyagi are busy and now you won't be together to have each other's backs, and you're leaving the safety of that right after some strange man specifically picked you to manipulate and abuse. He tried to isolate you and I'm just worried that you'll over course correct at school. Like you'll try and make friends but you'll get into trouble or you'll not make any friends, that you'll be too scared to interact with people. You're not going to the one with the guys, you're doing some community college."

"It's cheaper."

"Yeah and that's fine, but I'm worried okay? I don't get why you're leaving the safety of the shop to open yourself up to attacks again."

"Ma, I'm not a danger magnet."

She laughed. Dry, humorless.

He sighed and Johnny gently rubbed his back and got up to get them tea.

"Ma, I can't stay in the shop I'm going to beat up strangers if I do."

"What? Why?"

"Because half our customers show up to oggle at Johnny. I gotta remove myself from the situation."

Moshe was standing in the kitchen with a mug. "Hey, Johnny what can I get you?"

"I was thinking of making them tea."

Moshe laughed. "Good idea. At least this part of the argument is new huh?"

"Yeah," Johnny said softly.

He could still hear them.

"You know Johnny isn't going to date a customer."

"I know that! But I don't like them looking!"

"Honey you can't stop them from looking," Lucille said laughing.

"I know, which is why I have to do something else!"

Johnny filled the kettle Moshe handed him with water, ears burning, putting it on the stovetop.

"Wasn't Johnny in a magazine?" Lucille asked.

She sounded delighted. Amused.

"He was," Daniel sounded sour, almost like he was pouting.

Johnny could imagine him with his arms crossed and frowning.

"Why aren't you upset about that?"

"It's from before we were dating."

"So?"

"I try not to think about it."

"Didn't Tommy's aunt give you all the magazines?"

"Mom!"

"What, he mentioned it to Laura. She's been trying to collect all these photos of Johnny so he said she should ask you or he could ask his aunt. Don't you have a lot of photos of Johnny?"

"Ma!"

"Right, So Tristen-" Lucille started.

"Oh no," Moshe said softly laughing into his mug. "Should've rescued him earlier. Whoops. Every man for himself I guess."

"Johnny used to model for some teen magazine. And they did when he was in Okinawa. So there are all these photos out there in the world of Johnny yet he's worried and upset about customers coming in, buying stuff from his shop, but taking an opportunity to see Johnny. Does that make any sense to you?"

"I-" Tristen began.

"There's a difference Tristen. I don't have to see people looking at the magazine or the ads or whatever. But I do see them when they're talking about Johnny right in front of me and I have to be friendly."

"Well-" Tristen said.

"They really talk about Johnny in front of you?" Lucille asked.

The water kettle began to whistle.

"Yes, Ma that's what I mean. I get, angry and annoyed and that's no way to run a business. So I gotta take a break before I snap and say something I regret but mean."

"Daniel," Lucille said gently.

"So I gotta do it Ma. It's not me abandoning them. It's me trying to protect Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees from myself. Because I will start a fight with the next person who comments on Johnny's body. Chozen being home has made it worse."

"You okay at work?" Moshe asked and Johnny blinked up at him surprised.

"Yeah, everything is fine."

"I mean all these people coming to see you."

"I hadn't noticed," Johnny said.

"They aren't like harassing you are they?"

Johnny thought back to the people who came to the shop. Everyone was so friendly he just assumed it was the atmosphere the shop excuded. He had been surprised that people came up to him and asked him questions. He thought Daniel or Mr. Miyagi looked more approachable. He'd expected to spend all his time just lugging things around, not talking to customers. But he did. He talked to a lot of customers and it was exhausting. But it wasn't bad. And they weren't upset if he redirected them to Mr. Miyagi or Daniel when he was carrying things. Maybe they hesitated a split second but Johnny hadn't understood why that happened so frequently. He thought maybe they were worried he'd drop what he was carrying. But now...

"No, just more people talk to me than I was expecting."

"Sounds like it's been bothering him for a while."

"Clearly," Tristen said taking Moshe's mug from him and taking a sip. Then wincing. "Ugh the earl grey?"

"Yup."

"Can't believe you left me behind."

"Sorry, I got up to make tea and then this argument started up again and I thought why not just stay in the kitchen?"

"Heartless and cruel."

"Hey, at least they moved into a different argument, though this one is more pointedly awkward."

"Yeah, Johnny do you like bonsai? Like is working with bonsai something you enjoy?"

"Yeah," Johnny said looking at the boxes of tea, picking some out for Lucille and Daniel. "It's peaceful."

"I don't think I've ever seen a bonsai before," Moshe said. "And here Daniel's made a shop for them."

Tristen laughed softly. "Out of all the things I expected him to do after school this was not it."

"What did you think he was going to do?" Johnny asked.

"I thought he'd become a professional soccer player."

He probably couldn't now. Because of Johnny.

Johnny looked down at the mugs with a frown.

He wondered if that had been Daniel's dream and he'd crushed it.

Hurt his knee so he couldn't pursue it professionally.

"Really?" Moshe asked gently smacking Tristen on the shoulder.

"What?"

Moshe sighed. "I thought he'd be a radio show host. He likes to talk."

"Why not on TV?" Johnny asked, swallowing down the flood of guilt.

"I figured if he was on TV he'd get a lot of calls that would essentially be who let the kid on set? He's 12," Moshe said with a grin.

Johnny nodded. "True."

"His dad was the same," Tristen said. "I thought he was an underclassman for a long time. Freaked when I realized he was like a month older than me."

"Got that LaRusso babyface," Moshe said with a laugh. "Be careful Johnny people are going to think he's your son when you get older."

Johnny wrinkled his nose. "That's going to be awful."

"It's why I was surprised when Lucille said he came home drunk. I was like who would look at Daniel and give him alcohol?" Tristen said.

"Oh, that was from beer pong at a party," Johnny said.

"Did you play?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I was getting the pizza and didn't know he was playing. It was a big party. Plus I was one of the designated drivers."

"How responsible. So how'd he do?"

"According to Daniel, he sucks at beer pong."

"Oh! Maybe we can do that!" Tristen said.

"You want to do beer pong at, four in the afternoon?" Moshe asked amused.

"No, tonight. We can do it with sodas and stuff, so he can get better you know? His dad was amazing at it."

"He had to be, he fell asleep when he drank too much. It took all of us to drag him home."

"Yeah, he's got a legacy to live up to. We should play after dinner. Johnny, how are you at beer pong?"

"Pretty good."

"Oh look at that confidence. How should we do teams? Split them up or put them together?"

"Let's think about that."

"Sounds fun," Johnny said carrying the tea out.

Johnny was surrounded by Daniel's aunts.

"Can you cook?"

"I learned a little in Okinawa and Daniel's sometimes teaches me."

"Do you have a job?"

"I work at Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees."

That didn't seem to go over particularly well. It was Daniel's shop after all and Johnny knew it didn't sound good. Sounded like he was just a guy who didn't know how to do anything and Daniel had given him a job and was teaching him how to cook.

"Are you going to school?"

"No."

Once upon a time, his answers were impressive now he realized they were kind of sad. Or at least came off sad. Once upon a time, his answer was to make Sid and his mother look good. But now-

"Stop pecking away at him," Lucille said walking into the room and standing next to Johnny, arms crossed.

"Lucille, he-" the woman dropped her voice, "kind of seems like a deadbeat."

It was like he wasn't there.

Johnny felt his palms itch.

He was usually so good with families and parents, but of course, a whole brood of LaRusso's would crawl under his skin.

Maybe if he'd helped out like he'd wanted. He could look for something to do.

"He's a good boy."

"Does he come from a good family?"

"His mother is an amazing woman. Now stop pestering," Lucille said putting her hands on Johnny's shoulders and moving him out of the kitchen. "I am so sorry," she said. "I will give them a piece of my mind later. Why don't you go find Daniel?"

Daniel was talking to his Nonnio and Nonnia and Johnny didn't want to interrupt, so when she turned her back he wandered off.

He probably shouldn't have.

It was someone else's house and it looked like he was snooping. But he wanted to get away from all the people. There were too many of them and they didn't like him. So his best move was to be elsewhere.

He wandered through the apartment looking for things he could do, things he could fix like he used to do with Mr. Miyagi.

He found a burnt-out light bulb in one of the closets and took it down and replaced it when he found the tool kit.

He found that there was a leaky tap in one of the bathrooms and went to work.

He walked around the apartment, moving inch by inch to look for things.

There was a window that didn't open and he fixed it.

It ate into time and it felt good to be busy.

When it was time for dinner he put away the tools and went downstairs.

Daniel grabbed his hand and pulled him to a side of a crowded table and Johnny braced himself.

Prepared himself for all of the talking with hands, the accidental smacks, but surprisingly he didn't get hit.

They turned as they spoke, moving their hands but not towards people, adjusting to where there was free space, in front of them or next to them. It was fascinating to watch, they really didn't bump into anyone or anything.

The food was amazing, chicken and pesto penne, a pot roast with

artichokes and sun-dried tomatoes, a salad with bread, tomato, cucumber, basil and onion, and focaccia.

It was a lot of food.

Johnny had thought Lucille and Daniel made a lot of food, but this was intense. But with so many people it made sense. And it was a long meal. Everyone sat around the table for hours. Johnny listened to how school was going for the older cousins in college, how the orchard and farms were doing for one of the aunts, a reminder that everyone was supposed to take some preservers home with them.

Moshe and Tristen sat close and Tristen would occasionally turn to Johnny and explain something. Some intricacy he didn't know. Like how one of the cousins had dropped out but hadn't technically told their parents yet and that was probably going to be an explosion over the weekend, or how the farm had done super well that year and there were too many preserves so the aunt was drowning in them and didn't want to waste food so Tristen and Moshe were driving up to help carry crates off to food banks. And the stuff that was getting too mushy was going to turn into something else. They'd done it last year and it'd been kind of fun. Maybe Johnny and Daniel could come some future year.

It was nice to just listen and when Daniel wasn't talking with his hands one would settle and rest on Johnny's arm or leg.

After dinner, Tristen and Moshe set up an all-ages-friendly version of beer pong.

Johnny walked over to Daniel who looked at it with a growing frown.

"It's not beer," Johnny said.

"No?"

"Soda I think? Water?"

"Isn't the point that the loser gets drunk?"

"I think in this case the point is bragging rights."

"So who's playing?" Daniel asked.

"We are."

"What? No."

"I didn't volunteer us. Tristen and Moshe think you need to be better at beer pong. Some family legacy?"

Daniel looked at Johnny surprised then at Tristen and Moshe. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, I guess it was something your dad was good at."

"Oh."

"If you don't want to play with me I'm sure your mom would-"

"That's not-" Daniel gently took Johnny's hand. "I was really bad okay? And I got frustrated and so I got worse at it and I don't even remember who I played against but I got way too into it and way too upset over losing."

"You won't be drunk this time though," Johnny said.

"Yeah."

"Plus if you get better here then we can play against the guys some time and crush them."

"I like the sound of that."

"I thought you would," Johnny said with a grin. "So you in?"

"Are *you* any good at it?" Daniel said looking up at him like he doubted it.

Doubted Johnny who had to take all sorts of lessons for Sid and the country club from tennis to table tennis to squash and golf so Sid could talk to people wasn't skilled at the intricacies of throwing a ping pong ball into a cup on the other end of a table.

Johnny.

Who attended parties all throughout high school at Jimmy's house, with the guys, and all their classmates and got dragged into playing whenever he wasn't designated, sober person? Who people refused to play with him and Ali because she got too drunk and he just got better at it?

"You'll see," Johnny said.

"You two going to play?" Moshe asked.

"Yes," Daniel said, arm hooking through Johnny's as they head towards the table.

He was deadly serious as he stepped up to the table. There wasn't a prize. It wasn't like he won something if he did well.

Johnny wondered how bad he could be.

Ali had been okay at it. But she got drunk quickly.

Bobby was awful at it so Johnny doubted Daniel was worse than Bobby.

Beer pong usually led to Bobby getting distracted and wandering off, leaving his partner to continue on without him. Johnny usually found him later with a girl, completely having forgotten why he'd left or that he'd been in the midst of a game.

But he'd passed out once, though that might have just been the one time at the lodge where Dutch had found the hard liquor and poured that into the cups instead of the beer. They'd all fallen asleep in the master bedroom that night because the stairs weren't an option but a hazard and the big bed was enough for all of them. Everyone else had sort of fallen and it'd become a game between Jimmy and Johnny. The most intense beer pong of his life and arguably the most drunken. But that was because Jimmy was also good and by the end of the night, they both had to hold onto the table to stay upright.

Daniel was very focused.

He'd hold the little ping pong ball and try to measure the right angle to get it in, he'd sway and close one eye, all intense, and then it'd bounce off and he'd miss. He frowned, leaning over to Johnny to complain about how he'd thought he'd gotten it but he'd miscalculated because he forgot about the movement in the house, an aunt or uncle coming in from outside, or moving around. There was an excuse for each miss.

It was like when Daniel was on the sidelines watching matches with Mr. Miyagi. The way he'd cross his arms and lean over to tell Mr. Miyagi something, upset, and how Mr. Miyagi would just nod, or how he'd gesture towards what was happening, all arm movement before turning to Mr. Miyagi as if Mr. Miyagi wasn't watching the exact same thing. But now Johnny was in that position and it was kind of funny.

A lot of *yes, I did see that, you were very close.*

He would've tried to wrap his arms around Daniel and help him try and angle the ball right, but his arms were swinging too wildly too frustrated at missing and getting agitated. He was trying not to laugh because it was cute how into it Daniel had gotten. How serious he was taking it. How he was lifting up the ping pong ball and talking to it, very seriously, like they were teammates before he'd throw it.

Moshe and Tristen were good and Johnny was glad that they'd agreed to soda and water. They were trying to teach Daniel from the other end of the table. *You gotta do this Daniel* and *You gotta do it like that Daniel.*

Johnny missed two out of three on purpose.

He didn't want Daniel to be the only one failing.

He wanted to exaggerate his movements because he knew Daniel was watching, and hoping he was learning that way, when he did get them in on purpose.

It took a while, but Daniel was getting better. It was because he was doing what he always did. Analyzing the situation. Instinct. What made him good at karate, at breaking ice.

The excitement when he got the first one into a cup was like a flood. He maybe was too proud because he just scooped Daniel up off the ground. Daniel wasn't upset about it. But then Johnny remembered where he was and very carefully set Daniel back down. Once he figured it out it was game over. He improved in leaps and bounds. It became a fiercer competition and drew a crowd of cousins and aunts and uncles. They didn't win per se but they also weren't completely crushed like it had looked like would happen at the start. And Daniel's confidence was growing by the second. He was going to be insufferable. But Johnny was proud of him. Was looking forward to the next party where Daniel could show off his new skill and watch him crush the guys or girls or both, depending on who was around. He wondered if Kumiko and Jessica would like to play. Though maybe that'd disappoint Yukie, make Johnny and Daniel seem like bad influences if they played beer pong with Kumiko and Jessica. But then again Sato and Yukie played drinking games with Mr. Miyagi almost every night. So maybe, maybe they'd teach them the game and they could all play. He'd mention it to Daniel later.

When the game was over Moshe and Tristen taught a couple of kids

how to play and then younger cousins took over and Daniel gently took his hand, leading him over to Nonnia and Nonnio.

"We'll see you tomorrow," Daniel said, leaning down to kiss them on the cheeks.

"Tired?" Nonnio asked.

"We got up early for our flight," Daniel said. "I heard tomorrow is going to be busy."

"I wouldn't know," Nonnio said with a deep sigh. "*Tesoro* has told me nothing."

"Don't listen to him," Nonnia said. "He's acting all wounded but he loves surprises. Good night, it's great to see you both, we'll see you tomorrow."

"Good night," Johnny said before following Daniel out and across the hall to Tristen and Moshe's.

When they got through the door Daniel stretched and let out a satisfied sigh, turning to Johnny. "Do you know how nice it is to not have to sleep on the floor?"

"I don't know, I kind of liked it in Okinawa."

Daniel frowned. "Sleeping on Nonnio and Nonnia's floor will be nothing like Okinawa. We'd be sharing the floor with *everyone*."

"It sounds kind of nice."

"I'm almost tempted to tell you to shower and give it a try, but I want you by my side and I don't want to go over there. Or let the rumor mill start running because you're over there and I'm here. By morning Mom would come to breakfast and ask if we broke up. And I'd have to tell her you just wanted to *experience* sleeping on the floor with everyone. And she'd think I'd lost it."

Johnny laughed following Daniel off to their room. "I doubt your mother would think that."

"Just you wait. Some rumor or something will happen. It always does."

"I'm not worried," Johnny said pulling Daniel close, arms around his waist. "I am thinking though that now that you've mastered beer pong maybe we should play with Mr. Miyagi and Sato, see if Yukie wants to

play. Could be fun, or our friends back home."

"Mr. Miyagi and beer pong was not a thought I thought I'd ever have," Daniel said thoughtful, wrapping his arms around Johnny's neck, pressing close and letting his fingertips brush against the back of his neck, a ghost of a touch that sent a shiver down Johnny's spine. "But I kind of like it. That could be fun. Though he could be great at it."

"Right?" Johnny asked.

"It's a good idea," Daniel said leaning in and kissing him warm and soft and tasting like soda.

In the morning Johnny got up when Daniel did. They were supposed to be next door early but Moshe gave them coffee before they went next door for breakfast.

"You ready?" Moshe asked Johnny.

"For what?" Johnny asked trying the coffee. Needed more cream.

"They're morning people and there's a lot of them. Add in energetic children and it's chaos."

"I think I can handle it."

"Brave last words," Moshe said with a laugh. "We won't be there today, we're just going to pop in and wish everyone a good day before we head out. But we'll see you guys tonight."

"Thanks for letting us, well I guess, thanks for letting me stay with you," Johnny said.

Moshe smiled giving Johnny's shoulder a warm squeeze. "Glad to have you and finally put a face to a name and a whole bunch of stories."

"Not all of which are good," Johnny said.

Moshe laughed softly. "Hey, the good had outweighed the bad for a long time now. At least the stories we get."

"Today's the shopping day," Daniel said walking in putting on his gloves and taking the coffee Johnny handed out to him, giving him a quick kiss. "It's a lot of work and it's slow because Nonnia talks to everyone. But it can be kind of fun."

Lucille laughed digging around in her purse. "It isn't fun. It's a lot of organizing and a lot of carrying things and it's exhausting watching a nephew or niece debate between twelve different scarves to decide which one is good for Nonnio," She smiled and then clapped her hands. "Okay we ready?"

"Johnny just needs to grab his new jacket," Daniel said.

Johnny finished off his coffee and headed towards the door, hooking his new winter stuff over one arm before heading across the hall with everyone. Daniel taking his coffee mug with him.

Moshe was right. It was loud. People calling from one end of the apartment to the other end. Checking in that they had everything. Kids weren't up though. It looked like they were asleep for the most part. Johnny followed Daniel through to a spot on the couch that was empty, sitting beside him and waiting. Slowly everyone filtered in and then an aunt stood at the front, counting everyone. Satisfied that everyone who was supposed to be there was she spoke.

"I need a volunteer to stay and watch the kids."

Johnny waited for a hand to shoot up, for someone to volunteer.

He spotted one of the kids who was supposed to be in another room peering in through the door.

"If I don't get a volunteer I'm going to have to draw straws."

"I'll do it," Johnny said.

She blinked, looking at him only momentarily surprised before nodding and moving on to who was driving.

Maybe he shouldn't have volunteered, should've stayed quiet and gone shopping with Daniel and Lucille, but he wanted to be useful.

That old itchiness to be doing something, and he couldn't let a kid know the fact that the adults had to draw straws to stay behind. While all the adults and the older kids were out doing fun things they were stuck together without their parents.

He was good with kids.

He could do this.

It'd be fine.

They all packed up and got ready to go and Daniel hovered for a moment.

"You sure? Do you want me to stay?"

"I'm sure," Johnny said smiling at him giving him a quick kiss. "You don't get to see your family often, go have fun I'll see you when you get back."

In a whirlwind, they were gone and Johnny frowned.

They hadn't given him any information in their rush to leave.

No allergies, no emergency phone contacts, no doctor's numbers, no schedules.

The only one over the age of 13 left was Nonnio sleeping in his chair.

He walked through the apartment, there were twelve kids.

The kid that had listened in had run in and they were clearly expecting him and were unimpressed, disappointed they hadn't gotten to go.

"Anything you want to do today?" Johnny asked.

He got silence as a response. Not something he'd ever expect from anyone with LaRusso blood.

"I'm going to assume it's not sit in this room all day. Though maybe it is," Johnny said with a shrug when he saw one of the kids in the corner scribbling away on some paper.

"Louie Jr. says you used to be in a gang."

Ah there, that was a familiar LaRusso. Couldn't stay quiet for long. And of course, Louie Jr. had spread rumors with the kids. Johnny felt like if anyone was in a gang it was just the LaRusso's in their entirety. He still had a feeling they were a mob. He just wasn't in yet.

"I wouldn't call it a gang," Johnny said.

"Said you get into fights all the time. A big snob meanie."

At least they were honest. But the thought that Louie Jr. called him a big snob meanie was kind of hilarious. He'd have to ask. See what he said. *So still think I'm a big snob meanie?*

"When'd he say that?" One of the other kids asked.

"When we visited last January and were asking about Daniel."

"He didn't say nothin' over the summer."

"Well in January he said Johnny was bad. Scary."

"He doesn't seem scary."

"Louie Jr. isn't scared of no one. I think you're full of lies."

"Scary mean to Daniel."

"But they're dating."

One of the kids turned to Johnny very seriously. "Did you bully Daniel into dating you?"

"No. I wasn't nice to him the year before last but I didn't pressure or bully him into dating me. I told him I liked him and I understood if he didn't want to be around me anymore but it turned out he liked me back."

"Why wouldn't he want to be around you?"

"Because I hadn't been nice to him when he moved to California. I hurt him. And then I didn't tell him I liked him for six months or so after we'd started hanging out on friendly terms. I didn't know how he'd take that. Plus I thought he liked Kumiko."

"Whose Kumiko?"

"A friend of ours from Okinawa."

"Did you say you were sorry?"

"I did."

"And you meant it?"

"Yes."

"And you still like Daniel?"

"Love him." Johnny gently corrected.

"Oh!"

That seemed to have gone over well based on the gasps and the chatter that followed. They started, like most kids, a million questions, a quick avalanche that Johnny answered about California and Daniel and himself. It was easier than the rest of Daniel's family. They showed him the art they were working on and the stuff they'd brought with them and asked him to play games. They started with a couple of board games, where they had to break up into teams because there were too many of them. But it ended up being fun. For lunch, they made sandwiches and sat around with Nonnio.

"The snow out is nice," Nonnio said.

"Do you want to go out?" Johnny asked.

"Could be nice. When I was their age I loved snowball fights and playing in the snow."

Johnny turned to the kids. "Do you want to have a snowball fight? Or go out and play?"

He got a resounding yes. After cleaning up from lunch Johnny got them all up and into their winter jackets and their little tiny boots and Nonnio followed along and Johnny carried his chair as they walked down the street to the park. Nonnio picked out a spot where he wanted to sit and Johnny set up his chair and turned to the kids.

The kids looked a little unsure standing in the snow in their puffy jackets.

Johnny scooped up some snow. He packed it carefully into a ball. The texture wasn't great. It didn't hold its shape well enough but he got it together.

He threw it in a gentle lob where it hit one of the kid's backs, enough to notice.

That was enough.

One could say egging on 12 kids was a nightmare idea, on their home turf, especially LaRusso's. But Johnny had had worse ideas that had worked out.

He ran, scooping up snow as he went, carefully trying to prepare the snowball and then turning to throw it back at the kid who was closest to him. He was surprised, there'd been a couple of kids who seemed more interested in coloring than being out playing in the snow but

who'd come along anyway and they were there, amongst the small mob.

He spun on his heels again, changing his course, throwing the balls he'd managed to make back, gentle lobs that hit true and exploded in powdery white. While he was being gentle the kids were not, a hail of snowballs thrown with all their might.

Eventually, they did slow down, they started to tire, and much to his amusement when he turned around they were all lying in the snow. Nonnio was laughing from his chair over the book he'd brought out with him.

"I suppose I need to ask for a raincheck for this fight?" Johnny asked.

One kid held up a hand into the air. "Yes." was all they said before letting the hand fall dramatically with a crunch into the snow.

Johnny checked his watch. They'd taken care of part of the afternoon, with the kids at home it'd now be dinner time.

"Anyone hungry?"

"Yes," another kid said sitting up quickly.

Eventually, with the promise of food the kids got up and Johnny collected Nonnio's chair and they returned to the apartment.

They traipsed in chattering, dumping snowy boots at the door.

"Wait," Johnny said.

They stopped.

"Will your parents trip over those if the door opens?"

They looked surprised and turned around carefully putting the shows back in a neat and orderly way and then took a moment to put their jackets up before following him to the kitchen.

He looked through the cabinets trying to figure out what he could make. After taking stock he turned around, rolling up his sleeves.

"I'm still learning to cook so we're going to take a vote on what I can make. Okay?"

He got a bunch of nods.

"Okinawan meal of fish, rice, and soup."

He waited not a single hand raised. Not even Nonnio.

"or mac and cheese."

Every hand shot up.

"Okay, but we have to make a deal with the mac and cheese."

The chattering was so silent, Johnny turned to his audience with the pack of elbow noodles in hand. "I'm still working on my mac and cheese recipe so I want a full review. And I don't mean be nice. I mean be brutally honest. I know it's not going to be as good as your parents or your Nonnia's, but I want constructive criticism so I can make it better, so I'm expecting notes."

They looked a little shocked, turning and talking to one another as he found a large pot and filled it with water.

"Why?" one of the kids asked as he set it on the stove turned it on.

"It's Daniel's favorite food," Johnny said going to the fridge and gathering cheeses. "One of them anyway. Who better to tell me how I'm doing than his family?"

He'd made mac and cheese often for the kids he babysat back home, but they were perfectly happy with the stuff out of the box. They'd actually been shocked the first time he'd made them macaroni and cheese that wasn't fluorescent orange. He'd spent a little bit of time at his mom's testing out different cheeses and she had her favorite combination, but she liked sharper cheeses. The one Lucille had made for Daniel's birthday was creamier, less sharp and he didn't want to make hers exactly, but he wanted to know how to make it or at least a good one that Daniel would actually like. He was confident that he could cook the things Yukie taught him. He was pretty sure he could be thrown into the wild and feed himself off of fish because thanks to Mr. Miyagi he knew how to catch clean and cook a fish. But macaroni and cheese he wasn't sure about.

The kid's conversation verged into their favorite shows, the stuff they liked and Johnny listened, asking questions as he cooked. And before he knew it he was filling bowls and setting them out and waiting for feedback. They ate as if it was the most serious job they'd ever been given in their lives.

"It's good," one kid said.

"Needs another cheese though."

"Sharper or less sharp?" Johnny asked.

"Saltier."

He'd found a pen and paper on the counter and took notes of the feedback he got. They liked it was the takeaway, but it could improve. Which he figured.

After dinner, Nonnio retired to his chair to watch a bit of TV and the kids played for a bit, coming occasionally up to Johnny to ask him questions.

"Do you like karate?"

"I do."

"Is Daniel good at it?"

"He is."

"Are you good at it?"

"Yes."

"Does it snow in LA?"

"No."

"Is that why you don't have a hat?"

"I have one, I just forgot to wear it."

After a while with no parents returning and no word from anyone else, he herded them into the bathroom to brush their teeth, sending them off to get ready for bed.

"Do you want me to read a bedtime story to you?" he asked as they slowly filtered into the room where they slept. A lot of sleeping bags on the floor. He'd brought a couple of books with him. Daniel always complained that he didn't read anything current so he'd gotten a book from the library the librarian recommended.

"What's it about?"

"Magic," Johnny said before dipping out of the room to get his book.

He sat down carefully in a chair in the corner flicking the library book open. They got comfortable in their sleeping bags and waited.

He wondered if he should get a library card nearby so that he could have options. He hadn't seen a lot of books around the house that were for kids. He was pretty sure if he paid for the library card he could get it and he had money. And then when he visited he could pick a book up from the local library to read. There were a lot of books his mom used to read to him they might like. He carefully opened the book and began to read.

"In the land of Ingary, where such things as seven-league boots and cloaks of invisibility really exist, it is quite a misfortune to be born the eldest of three."

Soon after Sophie began her adventure they were struggling to keep their eyes and many had fallen asleep. Johnny smiled at the ones struggling and very quietly stuck the bookmark in the book and shut it.

"Will you read more tomorrow night?" one kid whispered.

"Sure," Johnny said carefully making his way around the sleeping forms and flicking off the light, and heading out into the living room where Nonnio sat. He was surprised to see that they still weren't back.

"Would you like anything?" Johnny asked.

"No no, come sit," Nonnio said motioning to the couch Johnny had spent the entire time he'd visited last time sitting on.

Johnny sat down.

"*Howl's Moving Castle*? Did they like it?" Nonnio asked.

"One that was still awake requested I read tomorrow night so I think so. If you don't mind me asking, why didn't you go with everyone else?"

"Oh, I'm not allowed. *Mio Tesoro* was very adamant that as it was all birthday prep I was to stay home. No finding out the surprises early. She takes it very seriously."

Johnny nodded thoughtfully.

"Do you know what *Mio Tesoro* means?" Nonnio asked.

"No sir," Johnny said shaking his head.

"Means **my treasure**. Because that's what she is, my family is my treasure," Nonnio said with a warm smile. "I know it's a bit overwhelming to be around them all. I know questions like *What do you want to do? What is your job? Are you going to go to college?* Can be overwhelming, and you don't need to worry about your answers. I know it probably felt judgmental, but it's okay to not have answers to those questions. When I was little I didn't have the same dreams as my classmates. I didn't want to be a doctor or a fireman. I didn't want to be a pilot. I didn't have any dreams like that. One of my friends ended up finding his dream later in life, stumbled upon it, but I never did, not that way. My dream ended up being this family I have. Instead, I'll ask this what do you like to do, what do you enjoy?"

Johnny looked at the carpet thoughtfully. "I like reading, spending time with my friends. I like gardening with my mom. I like driving my car."

"I notice Daniel wasn't in that," Nonnio said with an amused look in his eyes.

"You asked like, not love," Johnny said.

Nonnio laughed. "You know Tesoro started that sweater for you long before we ever met you. And it's exactly because of that."

Johnny looked at him confused and waited.

"Daniel, as I'm sure you are aware, like everyone in this family can talk a lot. And he'd call home and he'd talk to us, we've got two phones so that Tesoro can listen on one and I can listen on another and we can also chat. I also use the other phone to keep up on all the family gossip. When Daniel lived here he'd come by after school at least once a week and talk about school and his friends and the stuff he was doing and whatnot. But when he moved to California it was a lot of nothing. A lot of words that meant nothing. Mio Tesoro nearly packed her bags to go, but I told her Lucille had it under control, and if she needed help she knew we'd be there in a heartbeat. But she never did. Then he started talking about Mr. Miyagi and karate and it was something. But last January he started talking about you. He probably never realized it, but we'd call to check in once a week and

every time Lucille handed the phone over to him we'd get a little bit about school and classes but the majority of the conversation was about you. More so after he broke up with that girl...he never told us her name. But you, *Johnny Lawrence*. He'd talk about your car, about the bonsai Mr. Miyagi gave you that you carried around with you, the books you were reading, sometimes the most mundane things. Oh, what was one that made Tesoro laugh? Oh right, *we had celery at lunch and he ate them but slower than normal. I don't think he likes celery,"* Nonnio laughed softly.

"I don't like celery that much," Johnny said. "It's too fiber-y. But it's okay in soup."

"So Tesoro turned to me one day after one of these long calls that was mostly about you and said *I think he likes him, don't you?* And we figured either he'd made a lifelong friend or he was falling in love and hadn't realized it. Neither Mio Tesoro or I had heard Daniel talk like that and she wanted to make you a sweater. Would pace around with her knitting needles trying to figure out how to get the information she needed. Because she figured even if you were just a friend, well we were so relieved he'd finally made a friend his age. One that according to Lucille was looking out for him and keeping him safe. I know it's impossibly hard, but she talked about how you brought him home drunk and put him to bed in the fondest tone. And then Daniel mentioned that you were in a magazine. And then he caught himself. Like he hadn't meant to say it. Mio Tesoro went on a mission. She talked to everyone about teen magazines that featured a blonde California boy. You would not believe the number of wrong turns she went down. Until eventually, she got it," Nonnio leaned over to dig around in a basket full of magazines and plopped one onto the coffee table.

Johnny recognized it.

"With that, she knew what you looked like and she was able to call the editor and ask how tall you were. It was a little weird listening to that call. It sounded like they got that call a lot. Or answered it a lot. She managed to get your measurements from the editor and was able to get to work. It wasn't done yet when you visited, but it just renewed her energy on it."

"I thought it was only for family," Johnny said softly.

Nonnio smiled. "That is generally how it goes, but family doesn't have to be the people you share blood with or marry. They're the people

who are there for you when you need them, good times or bad. Tesoro made them for Moshe and Tristen when Daniel's father wouldn't stop talking about them either. His friends, the oldest friends who were by his side through thick and thin and even after he was gone. They still come by. They have dinner with us more often than some of our kids do. They're family. It has become a thing of welcome to the family for people who marry into the family but Mio Tesoro will drag her knitting needles if she feels like they're not really in for the family, but Johnny some of those people are failing at things you've done without even thinking about it. Tesoro and I are very happy you're here and would've been whether or not you ended up with Daniel. I mean it helps, but you've already done a lot."

"I haven't done anything though sir," Johnny said confused.

"I know that you helped out Louie Jr. and his family."

"It was for selfish reasons though,"

"He was mean to you when you came to visit and yet you still spent hours on the phone with him for practically months helping him and his dad, helping Louie Sr. It may have been with a selfish goal in mind but you helped Lucille return to her son and allowed a family to have more dignity and mobility then they'd had before. You would not believe how helpful it has been for them to have a professional caretaker helping out. That was a lot of work Johnny. And you noticed that no one was going to volunteer to watch the kids. No one wanted to stay behind and be in charge of 12 children who we love because it felt like a chore. You didn't even know the kids, and rather than spend time with Daniel and Lucille you opted to babysit. And those kids had a blast. You wore them out, fed them a good meal, and got them into bed at a decent time. Plus I know it was you who fixed the leaky sink upstairs."

Johnny nodded.

"The reason Mio Tesoro made Daniel a matching sweater was because you two started dating and we approve. But your sweater was because we like *you*, we're thankful that you've been there with Daniel. You took him to the doctor, Okinawa, and this whole Silver thing. But Johnny I know you're thinking you did some of that because you had to, or because you loved him. You work hard to try and fix things from when Daniel moved to California, but, well I don't know if he told you this but he did tell us in one of his calls and I think you should hear it, he told us *I forgive him, but I don't think he's forgiven*

himself. And I think that's important Johnny, you need to forgive yourself because Daniel has, he did so long long ago."

Chapter End Notes

Lau Lau the Hawaiian food Mr. Miyagi made
The glass items in Lucille's house are Murano, a special Italian glass from Venice
The ceramics are Italian as well
According to NHS You can get frost bite at -0.55C (31F)
chicken and pesto penne
pot roast with artichokes and sun-dried tomatoes
salad with bread, tomato, cucumber, basil and onion
focaccia

Sunflower Heliotropism

Chapter Notes

> We're going to follow someone different in this chapter. We're going to go back to Johnny and Daniel in Newark after this chapter.
>
> I hope you are having a wonderful holiday season.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chozen stared at the bonsai that was Johnny's.

It wasn't particularly old, but you could tell it was well loved. It would live a long time. Be passed down through the Lawrence line.

Chozen liked that.

It was a beautiful line.

Ms. Lawrence was stunning and Johnny was even more so.

It made his chest hurt sometimes looking at him. But he couldn't not.

Kumiko teased him about it. A lot. Of course he looked at Johnny. Everyone did she'd tell him.

She said it like Johnny was a magnet that pulled people in. Well loved.

But what Daniel had said didn't match that.

He wondered if that was the issue with beautiful things. Sometimes they made people irrationally angry and wanted to crush them. Like flowers.

Chozen had been like that once.

He reached out to touch the tree then curled his hand back.

He'd offered to babysit it while Johnny was out of town. Earnest.

Every chance he could he tried to show he'd changed, that he was a better person. He and Kumiko went shopping in the mornings sometimes and Chozen would stop and look at something and Kumiko

would realize he wasn't with her and turn around to go back and find him.

Thinking about Johnny?

The answer was yes. But he hated that she knew. That she had no fear of him anymore.

Though she hadn't really had any from the start.

When he'd go to Miyagi sensei's house to visit growing up, while she was also visiting they'd sit politely when Miyagi sensei was around and then would fight as soon as he was out of sight or earshot.

He remembered getting in trouble for pulling her hair, feeling pissed because of course **he** got caught, but she hadn't been caught pulling his.

He was adamant that she started it.

Miyagi sensei had told him that he shouldn't be mean to girls. Because they were delicate. But he wanted to argue that Kumiko was anything but.

She was sneaky.

She played baseball sometimes when in town, had a strong arm that aimed true which made her a horror with tomatoes. And she *always* went for tomatoes. She had destroyed so many of his shirts. It was like as soon as he found a shirt he liked she got pissed at him and found a tomato. *Added it to her collection.*

He hadn't known what Johnny would say when he offered to babysit the bonsai.

He had hoped that Johnny would trust him to care for the bonsai. The bonsai he'd talked about in Okinawa. Spoke about so fondly. The one that Johnny held like it was precious and that he loved so much. The one, for the short time when their life under Mr. Miyagi's roof had overlapped where Chozen watched him with it.

The one time he sat with it, tools nearby, and eyes closed, thinking of something.

The way his shoulders relaxed. Breathing deep, the way Sato did when he meditated. Then he batted his eyes open studying the bonsai like it

was something new, like an artist, who was it? Kumiko had talked about it. *Michelangelo* who could see the figure beneath the marble and would work directly onto the expensive surface without testing it first. No fear. Just knowledge of how it should look.

He was beautiful. Calming. Chozen had never wanted so badly to be a bonsai.

Chozen would sit on the boards in Mr. Miyagi's garden and just watch. The way he moved his hands around the tree. A cut here, there.

He talked to it, ever so quietly and no matter how hard Chozen focused, no matter how hard he listened he never caught what he said.

If anyone got too close he stopped. So like a rare encounter with an animal you wanted to see he kept his distance, watched from afar, trying not to spook him.

And Johnny had smiled when he offered, hand on Chozen's shoulder, a warm weight.

"Thank you Chozen, but Mr. Miyagi's already offered. I appreciate your offer though and remembering."

He'd been disappointed, but he'd become tongue-tied and just had nodded.

Of course, Johnny had already made plans while he was out of town. But that smile had been worth the disappointment. And it wasn't like the bonsai was leaving. Instead, it'd be returning to Mr. Miyagi's. And that was nice. Nice that even though Johnny wasn't around his bonsai was at the house. And Chozen could sit next to it. Like a companion, a friend.

There were two bonsai Johnny had brought before he left.

Chozen thought about picking up Johnny's and moving it, but Johnny had set them together with such purpose, such care that it made him feel bad. He couldn't do it. It'd be like separating best friends. Which was weird. Because they were trees.

Instead, he went to them. He'd bring out his breakfast, a snack, or his morning coffee and he'd sit next to the bonsai and look out Mr. Miyagi's garden.

"Think he's having fun? Think they're being nice to him?" Chozen asked in Japanese.

It was a bonsai. It had to understand him.

It was also a tree.

He really didn't want Kumiko to catch him. He'd never live it down. She already had too much ammo.

"Sounds like a nightmare to me. Who'd want to be around that many LaRusso's?"

They didn't respond.

Sato and Mr. Miyagi were laughing in the distance about something and it was weird.

Chozen grew up with stories about *Nariyoshi.*

The name became like a curse word, an evil spirit that had to be warded off.

At first it was stories about Uncle's childhood, bedtime stories of adventures on the island. But then when he got a little older, old enough to go to school, the stories became bitter warnings. That the best of friends could stab you in the back, make a fool of you and then leave never to talk to you again. The ghostly specter of the unnamed best friend of his childhood became solid, was given a name.

Nariyoshi became like a kitsune in his uncle's stories. A trickster who wore the guise of a human to befriend everyone including Sato who fell for it, hard, only for when Sato's parents had chosen Yukie because she was a sweet girl and a dear friend, for Nariyoshi to make a fool of him in front of everyone. His best friend. Instead of talking to him directly, instead of anything else he attacked his honor in front of everyone including Sato's parents and Yukie's parents. Humiliating all parties.

It'd been a good match.

A good chance for Yukie to rise up out of poverty, a chance for Sato to give her a better life. He'd envisioned the three of them living in the same big house. The best friends of his life.

It wasn't like he hadn't known Yukie loved Nariyoshi and Nariyoshi

loved Yukie, he'd just thought maybe they'd also held some fondness for him. And he'd thought they'd at least talk about it privately, work something out. Sato just wanted them to be happy. But Nariyoshi knew what an outburst like that meant, one in front of everyone, the slight to his uncle's honor. He **had** to challenge him to a duel, he'd be disowned otherwise, and then what good would he be to Yukie? To anyone? And he was hurt. Hurt badly. He'd thought they'd have time to figure everything out after his parents made the announcement. Yukie's family was happy about the match. About the money the chance and the hope for her. But Nariyoshi didn't see it that way. Didn't understand, didn't try.

He told Chozen:

Friends cannot be trusted. People cannot be trusted. The only one who can be trusted is yourself. So you must become strong. Learn everything Miyagi sensei taught me to become the strongest because the only reliable human is yourself.

For a long time, Chozen thought his uncle had killed Nariyoshi. That it had ended in a bloody duel and Yukie had refused to marry Sato because of it. Heartbroken over the two men fighting over her and one dying. That Sato had been so heartbroken over it himself that he couldn't bring himself to marry. Even though he had several chances over the years. Several women from good families tried.

But that trust was gone. He didn't want to let anyone in unless there was a financial bond. Because *You know what the relationship is with money. They want to be paid. I want a service. That's all there is to it. They don't do it. They don't get paid. I find someone else. There is always someone else.*

The only person Uncle did like and trusted was Miyagi sensei. The two went fishing sometimes. Not often. But sometimes.

He always was quiet when he got home from seeing Miyagi sensei. Like time spent with the old man both helped him and hurt him. Badly.

It was only one drunk evening that Chozen heard about Nariyoshi the coward.

Rather than face Sato in a death match. Rather than talk to Sato. Rather than making any stand, he made a fool of Sato and then ran away.

Rather than appeal to the village, to their parents, he disappeared in the dead of night leaving pain and suffering behind.

Sato said Yukie had locked herself in her room and cried for weeks. She'd moved into Sato's home at that point and he'd just been tortured by the sounds of her sobbing for weeks. She'd begged him not to fight Nariyoshi and Sato had started to cave, his temper fading. The sting of the pain subsiding but then he was drowning in waves of it.

Yukie wasn't crying because Nariyoshi had left.

She wasn't crying in relief that she wouldn't watch him die.

She wasn't crying because she was supposed to marry Sato.

She was crying because Nariyoshi had left her behind.

And Sato felt that. Without a word, without note Nariyoshi had just disappeared into the middle of the night. A coward. One who refused to talk, refused to fight for their friendship, for the love of his life. All those words had meant nothing. All those years.

He let Yukie go. Told her to stay with Miyagi sensei. Because if anyone would hear from Nariyoshi it'd be his father. And they gave up on getting married. His shattered heart couldn't handle her tears anymore.

Sato thought, a small part of him, that Nariyoshi would reach out sometime. He thought maybe when he landed wherever he was going he'd reach out. He held onto the smallest of hopes he'd reach out to him. That despite the war he'd hear something. That they could try and fix things, because Nariyoshi had been so good at finding solutions, at fixing things.

He waited weeks. Months. He worried that Nariyoshi got caught up in the war. That he was out there somewhere fighting far from home and that he'd die before they'd ever get to speak again.

He waited years. No word.

Yukie still cried, but not as much.

The worst part of it though was the pity. From his parents, from the villagers. It was a small town. They talked about it a lot. About what would've been a fairy tale wedding. And it was always poor poor Sato. Poor poor Yukie.

The pity twisted something in him. Took the hurt and made it harder. Added fuel to that distrust. He talked about how Miyagi sensei always waited, always listened, had a friend at the airport he begged to call first chance if a Miyagi Nariyoshi ever booked a flight or stepped foot on the island so that he could be there when he landed. So that he could be the first person to greet him. To tell him they would make it okay. To welcome his son home.

It was like an additional wound. And that was part of the cowardice. To run away and not face the mess made. To just ignore the pain left in his wake. Uncle vowed to fight him to the death if he ever stepped back on the island. Retribution for years and years of pain. Not just for himself.

He said he wanted to go out into the world and find Nariyoshi, and that he was pretty sure Yukie knew where he was but she refused to tell him.

How little had their friendship meant?

Had it been a long con?

A game?

Sato told him he'd felt like a fool. A heartbroken fool. He closed himself off from everyone, even Chozen who lived with him, always had since his parents had pushed him into a Sato's arms before disappearing and never coming back. At least that's what Sato said, the one-time Chozen asked why he let Chozen stay with him if he didn't trust anyone.

Because you're like me. Abandoned. My good-for-nothing family couldn't even have the courage to raise their own kid. Cowards the lot of them. But you and I? We are not cowards. We are family. And I will not abandon you. And maybe you will learn from my mistakes, and guard your heart, your soul, from the same pain.

Chozen tried.

Tried to become a person that wouldn't fall from the same tricks Sato had. It meant he had friends but didn't trust them. It meant he was always angry because there was no one to talk to that he trusted. He didn't even like Yukie because he didn't understand why she hadn't just married Sato. Why she was so stiff when talking to Sato. As if he was the bad guy.

He did like Miyagi sensei though. Like every other kid in town after Nariyoshi left Miyagi took him fishing. Taught him how. Told great old stories. It was his only joy and he refused to let anyone know it, because uncle said happiness left you vulnerable to attack. And anyone and everything could use it against you. Take it away in the blink of an eye. So he sat sourly on that boat or on that beach with Miyagi sensei. Not complaining, barely talking, but soaking up everything he could get and burying it away. To keep him going.

It was easy to be angry. To be angry at the world because his parents had left. Because his only family left was angry. Because life was unfair. Because fairy tales weren't real. That there wasn't any balance in the universe. Because if there was then Miyagi sensei never would've gotten sick. He'd put so much good and love into their village and he shouldn't have gotten sick. He shouldn't have been hurt by Nariyoshi the coward.

Mr. Miyagi was what he went by when he arrived on the island and Chozen expected him to be alone. But he didn't come alone. He hadn't lived like a monk or a hermit which maybe then if he'd been just as lonely as Sato, as everyone he'd left behind then maybe Chozen would think he had some honor. But instead, he had a chatty student talking a mile a minute and Chozen hated him. Hated that Mr. Miyagi had left, had hurt everyone, and had made a new life out in the world.

He had a student. An outsider. A student he never took to see Miyagi sensei before as he should've.

A student who didn't go through the same trials by fire of trying to catch slippery fish while Miyagi sensei laughing nearby. The frustration of trying to catch them with your bare hands because patience was key to everything. Something his uncle was good at. Even when his uncle scared off all the fish. Even though it disappointed Miyagi sensei. Even though they fought about it and the little piece of Chozen's heart he thought he'd protected but had missed chipped every time they fought. Because Sato thought that he was owed, owed pieces of the island, things he could sell to make money. He didn't care about the village, the villagers, he didn't even really care about Yukie anymore.

He respected Miyagi sensei but they grew distant over the years and Miyagi sensei got weak. Got sick.

It was unfair. Life was unfair.

Chozen tried to take comfort in the fact that Mr. Miyagi the coward's student was spindly, a weak-looking twig. He had no muscle hadn't trained long. But Chozen didn't think Mr. Miyagi deserved the title sensei. He didn't deserve to be a teacher. Let alone one so well loved. Not like his namesake. Not like his father.

At first, if Chozen could have wished for anything it would've been that Daniel hadn't come to Okinawa. But if Daniel hadn't come then Johnny wouldn't have. And that always stuck that wish in his throat from fully forming.

Johnny had clearly not been a cowards student. Couldn't have been Mr. Miyagi's and it was a curiosity. One he kept glancing back at in the car ride. One he kept puzzling over, even though the small bits of revenge he got for his uncle were satisfying yet hollow at the same time.

Johnny didn't back down and he was like the military men Chozen taught but nothing like them. He didn't make crude jokes, didn't ask Chozen where to find babes or get a drink, didn't automatically throw an arm around him and try to use that weight or mass to push him down or around.

Chozen had flipped many military men to the ground was always satisfied to see the shock on their faces, only when they realized he was their sensei did the respect come and it'd taken a long time to get there, to get it to the point where a new arrival would instantly get chewed out by the old ones for trying to mess with Chozen.

It was refreshing. Like Johnny was a sea breeze on a hot summer day. He wasn't angry. He listened and he responded based on it. Except he kept asking questions that unsettled everything and made him uncomfortable. And Chozen saw him around the village, helping out, running errands, speaking little bits of Okinawan, Japanese, trying. He wasn't used to people trying. The military men always wanted things to be like they'd been at home, got frustrated and angry when it wasn't and Johnny accepted that it wasn't like home. That it was somewhere new and he respected it. Learned like he really wanted to know.

Chozen wanted to ask him a million questions but couldn't do so without getting angry. Because of Miyagi, because of Daniel. Because of a history of horrible bedtime stories and warnings like a twisted fable. *Chozen do not stray from this path or you'll be hurt. You'll be betrayed. Anger is your best tool, the best way to protect your honor.*

But then Johnny would ask him something. Would want to clarify things, to understand what Chozen meant.

How is Mr. Miyagi a coward?

Because he didn't come back. He didn't talk. He left pain in his wake. He **forgot** about everyone. And people always leave. At least once a year the house got dark and quiet. Sato got drunk. He got pissed. Got angry. He never hurt Chozen. But he yelled at Nariyoshi who wasn't ever there.

Why did you leave? Why didn't you talk to me? What is the point of everything? Are you even out there coward? Where did you go? Why don't you come back? Do you know how many hours Yukie cried? How many your father cried? Coward! What kind of joke was it? 18 years of friendship. Best friends since before we could walk! What kind of man declares his love, challenges the system and then runs away? Come back here and fight me coward! You love this island more than you love Yukie more than you love your own father! Well I'll get rid of it. Sell it piece by piece. Then nothing will remain. That's what you want right? We'll all disappear just like you.

Yukie said you married, that your wife died, that your child died. She refuses to tell me where you are. How she found you. How dare you. Yukie's been waiting for you. Your father has been waiting for you. You should've brought them home. Coward. Come back and face me. Talk to me. How dare you leave without a word.

Sensei and I fight now, all the time and it's because of you. We stopped talking. It's because of you. He won't let me help him. Keeps asking me not to fight you. To let it go. It's all he or Yukie say to me anymore.

If I let it go...then what was the point? The point of you leaving? The point of you hurting Yukie? Your father...sensei...me? Why don't you write? Why couldn't you have just...been like a normal friend? Send a postcard at least once. For Yukie. For sensei. Do you know how often they stand on the beach? Wondering where you are? How often they go to spread rice to wish you a safe journey wherever you are? Whatever you're doing?

The anger was fine. But sometimes Sato cried on those nights. When he'd gotten too drunk. Chozen usually went in then. To check on his uncle. To ask and see if he needed something and he'd show Chozen pictures. Of the coward. Of his old friend. A chance to see that even the most devious of humans could hide in an unassuming shell.

Johnny had thought Mr. Miyagi was kind. None of it matched with

what Chozen knew. It didn't match the pain in Miyagi sensei's eyes, or Sato's, or the quiet distant look Yukie got in her eyes while she was tending to Miyagi sensei's garden or cooking. When she didn't think anyone was looking.

And when Chozen saw Mr. Miyagi he didn't get it. Why would those two, Daniel and Johnny follow him across the ocean? Of course Mr. Miyagi only showed up when his father was dying. Of course he hadn't been brave enough to come earlier. *Before* he'd gotten sick.

He regretted things now, but in the moment it felt like Mr. Miyagi came for his own conscious, a cheap gesture. But he learned later that Mr. Miyagi hadn't known. Hadn't wanted to fight Uncle, hadn't wanted to kill his best friend. Had saved his life. A misunderstanding born from action and not discussing things that spanned decades. It made Chozen's stomach churn now, but at the time it'd just pissed him off more. It'd been like a switch. Sato became someone he'd never met. Like spring, he supposed.

His home was brighter. And a part of Chozen, a part of himself that had grown hard growing up in a hopeless house hated it. Was bitter. That could've been his life. A life of helping the people in the village, of them *liking* him, of spending his days with Yukie and her smiling at him, of phone calls from Kumiko to check-in.

He'd been the one to send her away. He'd gone to her house with a brand new suitcase and a plane ticket to Tokyo, had used Sato's contacts, his own military contacts to find a good troupe.

She was the closest he had to a real friend. Family. A little sister. Or, if Nariyoshi-san had never left, then maybe she would've been like a cousin.

Maybe they'd have gotten along without the stories. And he felt bad. Kept thinking of the way Johnny always rushed forward to defend his friends when he could, rising to the challenge, the way he swallowed down pain and never mentioned it and that hurt. Knowing *he'd* hurt Johnny and hadn't meant to. He had reveled in the chance to fight him, like a game, like somewhere along the way he'd forgotten how to interact with others and only knew how to socialize through fighting. It was still a pain he felt. Like he'd done something unforgivable.

Johnny didn't look like someone who would run. Not like Nariyoshi-san. And that'd given him hope. He hadn't known what to do with it.

Kumiko would say it was because he was out of touch. That Chozen

couldn't flirt worth all the money in his bank account. But he could. When he didn't care. And he hadn't cared about much in so long.

It didn't help that Johnny liked Daniel. He didn't get that. Who could withstand all of that talking? It was like a flood, gave Chozen a headache. Yet Johnny had moved in with that. Just because he was beautiful didn't mean he had good taste. Chozen thought the choice should've been obvious. Though Kumiko disagreed with him. But she disagreed with him on almost everything.

"Moping?" Kumiko asked sitting down next to him giving him a cup of tea.

"No," Chozen said taking it.

She bumped her shoulder into his. "I'm surprised you haven't moved Johnny's bonsai to the other end of the garden or something."

"I wouldn't dare."

"Really? Who are you?"

Chozen scoffed into his tea. "I'm always me."

"You say that, but I remember a very angry kid who would hold my homework over my head."

"And I remember a bratty kid who'd stomp on my feet whenever I did that. I don't pity you."

She blinked at him then smiled.

"What are you doing today?" he asked.

"Ali wanted to go do stuff. You want to come?"

Chozen frowned he could say no but Kumiko wouldn't let him.

Sure enough her hand was on his sleeve. "You cannot just stay here with Mr. Miyagi, Aunt Yukie and Sato all day. Let them have some fun of their own. Come on."

Every day. She refused to leave him alone. He thought it was because he got her to the Tokyo troupe. Because he helped her with her dream. He just wanted to make Aunt Yukie happy. Wanted to see her smile again. Thought Johnny would approve. And maybe, he'd never tell her, but she really was the closest thing he had to a friend and he

wanted her to be happy too. For her to follow her dream.

His excuse had been that there was no point in going to the USA to study dance when there were perfectly good troupes closer and that there might be some good if he had a famous dancer who owed him. He'd insinuated tickets to take a date, specifically a tall blonde one.

He wanted her to be happy. Wanted her to be healthy. Wanted her to follow her dreams and soar. Because he had seen her dancing sometimes. Saw the jumps she tried after watching the TVs in Naha, trying to teach herself. The way she'd spun.

He'd never cared about anything like that, never had a dream. He just followed in his uncles footsteps.

They came to LA because Johnny called. Because Chozen always answered the phone. Because he always called Mr. Miyagi's. Talked to Mr. Miyagi, talked to Johnny, hung up on anyone else. And Johnny's voice had rasped. Sounded like he was in pain. And that'd worried him. What had happened?

There was an ocean between them. But if something bad had happened he could hurry.

"Hey, you mind helping me with something?"

Of course. "What is it? You okay?"

Johnny had asked if Chozen or Sato thought about expanding their dojo to the USA, specifically about buying the Cobra Kai dojo. The dojo Chozen slowly learned was where Johnny had learned from the old teacher who'd hurt him. And Chozen was very down for helping him get revenge on that particular person. And Sato was on the phone before Chozen finished explaining the request, the situation.

He was buying their plane tickets, was calling Yukie telling her to pack that they were going to Nariyoshi this time.

She'd protested, said that she wasn't part of the plan. She wouldn't be of much help.

I will not leave you behind. Sato had told her. Serious. *Plus I'm sure Nariyoshi has missed you.*

"Ah they're here," Kumiko said at the sound of wheels out front, pulling on Chozen.

"I don't want to spend all day with girls," Chozen complained, letting himself be pulled along.

"Come on," Kumiko said. "You cannot literally spend all of your time with Johnny's bonsai."

"I could try. Better company anyway."

"You're planning to stay here right? You gotta make friends Chozen."

Little sister. Little. Why did she always act like she was older? Like she knew better? Like she was smarter and wiser? Worried about *him*.

"Is it okay if Chozen joins?" Kumiko asked as the car pulled up. Ali at the the wheel and Jessica sitting in the passenger seat.

"I don't know, Chozen you know we don't do death matches here right? You're not going to like fight someone who gets your order at McDonalds wrong right? Challenge them to the death?" Ali asked.

Johnny had warned him. He might as well be letting Kumiko push him into a trap.

"I know," Chozen said a little bitterly.

"If you can behave then come along."

Behave, what did that mean? Of course he could behave.

Kumiko tugged him along, pushing him impatiently into the car, into the back. He bit down a sigh, a sound of frustration, the desire to rip his arm out of Kumiko's grip. He knew how to get into a car on his own. She acted like he was five sometimes. And because she was hanging out with these girls they also treated him like he was a bad toddler.

"Did you two eat yet?" Ali asked.

"Aunt Yukie made us breakfast," Kumiko said shifting forward. "What did you do?"

"I had a boring thing at the country club with my parents. They do these brunch things and because I'm home we had to go."

"The food had to be good right?" Jessica asked.

"We had egg with lobster and caviar. There were also raspberry

pancakes with gold leaf. It's too much really."

"It sounds exciting," Jessica said.

Sounded like a waste.

"The gold leaf doesn't taste like anything it's not worth it."

"That's disappointing," Jessica said.

"Really it's not worth it. Anything with gold leaf on it, just skip it."

"Well Ms. Lawrence made me breakfast. It's still really weird staying with her, but my options are that or the guys since my aunt rented out my room to a musician whose now working part time in the shop. And as much fun as that could be Ms. Lawrence has been adamant that I'm not in the way and that she's more than happy to have me around and I kind of feel bad about the thought of leaving her to stay with one of the guys."

"Okay, which one would you stay with?" Ali asked, nose wrinkled. "Because really I would stay with Ms. Lawrence but it kind of sounds like you would be down for staying with one of those cobras."

"They're not cobras anymore," Jessica said.

They were still awful Chozen thought. But she'd gotten defensive over them. He supposed she'd spent the most time with them. And she probably wasn't on their hit list like he was.

"Yeah yeah, they're growing up or whatever, they can still be dicks."

Thank you.

Jessica sighed. "Dutch's place is way too intense. I think it'd be fun because there'd be so much to explore that I'd feel like Nancy Drew. Plus he's a lot of fun. I think we'd go for runs and cook and listen to music and it'd be fun. Bobby's house is bursting with sugar and he has cute little siblings. It's super cozy and nice. I feel like we'd eat junk food and talk about real shit. I mean I would with Dutch too but Dutch would give me super honest opinions and those aren't always nice. Like every time I complain about my boyfriend back home he just flat out tells me to break up with him. Which, okay I get it, they've never met and he's only heard the bad shit, but still. Bobby would listen and be sympathetic and more understanding. He gets wise sometimes and it's pretty helpful, but I'd get so sick of sugar and

I'd feel so sick after like two days. Plus we do fight over our baking styles. Midwest versus west coast. Jimmy's house is set up for guests and it's like party central. If he's not hosting one of his cousins is or his parents are and I think that could be a lot of fun but I'd also get tired of it. Like I don't know how anyone gets a good night sleep there-"

"That's because it's break. When we were in school Jimmy's house was only party central sometimes. But now that he's in school my parents said his house is just constantly hosting events. They think his parents miss him. It's how they're coping," Ali said.

"Ah, that makes sense. Anyway it does mean it's not really a great place to sleep now. And Tommy's place is just too small which I never thought I'd say. Their extra bedrooms are already full with film equipment and there's a dark room and it just seems like I'd be in the way even though I know Tommy would make sure I was treated like a princess," Jessica said.

"I can't believe you get along with all of them. Tommy I get, but the rest of them-" Ali shook her head. "better you then me honestly."

"They don't seem too bad," Kumiko said.

Traitor.

"You all are lucky, you didn't have to deal with them for years and years and years. They're a group of macho idiots. Like Kumiko you should know what that's like more than any of us, to have to deal with a macho idiot."

Her eyes met Chozen's. She meant *him*. He gritted his teeth. And here he was starting to warm up to her because he agreed with almost everything she said. He'd let himself get comfortable even for a split second.

Kumiko squeezed his shoulder scooting forward, hooking her arm around the back of Jessica's seat. "People can change."

"You really think that huh?" Ali asked glancing at her.

"I do. And people can change your life when you least expect it."

Chozen looked out the window at the passing palm trees with a frown.

Ali frowned then sighed. "Stop looking at me like that, so full of hope.

Okay fine, so they are good friends to people they like and you all are lucky because you met them after they started cleaning up their act. And there was a lot of shit going on that I didn't know about until it was really too late to help."

Chozen turned back, her shoulders were drooped.

"Can't read minds," Chozen said before he could stop the words from leaving his mouth.

He had thought it'd be best if he just kept his mouth shut the whole time. Less likely to have three girls beat him up or stop the car and kick him out. He did not want to have to figure out how to get back to Mr. Miyagi's on his own.

Ali glanced back at him, surprised, waiting.

Chozen looked away. "Uncle spent life thinking Miyagi-san left out of cowardice. Miyagi-san spent whole life not coming back because think unwelcome. Think have to kill uncle. If talked, no forty years of pain. Could not read the others mind. Ali-san not know about Johnny-san's pain because Johnny-san not say right? I hurt his arm. He didn't make a sound. Still feel bad. But... if say nothing I can do nothing. Not even apologize or help."

The car was quiet for a while and then Ali spoke, so softly, "Daniel noticed."

"Daniel-san very nosy," Chozen said.

Ali laughed.

"He sure gets into more trouble then any one else I've ever met," Jessica said with a sigh.

"Well some people also just won't let him be," Kumiko said pointedly.

Chozen frowned. The stories she'd been told were different from the ones he had been told. It was one of the things they fought about growing up. She thought Sato was evil and Nariyoshi was a tragic hero. She thought the only thing standing in the way of Yukie and Nariyoshi's happy fairy tale ending was Sato. Not that Sato had also been hurt. She always stuck her fingers in her ears when they were little and sang so loudly when he tried to explain that Sato wasn't the villain. Eventually, he gave up trying. Eventually, he stopped trying altogether. He realized some people would only believe what they

wanted and if he was going to the villain in her story by association with his uncle, the only family he had, the only family that *wanted* him then so be it.

So maybe he could see how it made things worse when Mr. Miyagi had returned to Okinawa with his students in tow. He hadn't been welcoming. He hadn't been friendly.

He'd been mean.

He'd taken all of that bottled-up anger over everything and dumped it onto Daniel's shoulders.

It hadn't seemed fair.

Nariyoshi, an untrustworthy monster from his childhood bedtime stories, a warning, a fable of danger had returned with a student. Two. Two students who were willing to fight on his behalf. A man who refused to fight his own battles would let his students fight for him?

How more cowardly could one get?

Sato would never allow Chozen to do the same. But there was always something about Johnny's tone, like things had been bad, that things weren't good and that Nariyoshi, now Mr. Miyagi had helped. That there was that root of Miyagi sensei there and that he'd sprouted into a sturdy reliable and well-loved tree that gave shelter to those in need.

Chozen didn't know how to take the two halves of perception of a man he didn't know, how to put them together.

He knew his own pain.

He knew his uncles.

He saw it in the bags under Johnny's eyes, his tussled blonde hair when he arrived. A teen who'd not slept. Who was haunted, yet he was there.

Daniel refused to fight. Mr. Miyagi refused to fight. But Johnny faced Chozen, wasn't scared. Not like the kids who ran away thinking his bad luck would rub off on them as a kid. Like parents just up and leaving was contagious.

"Well we are here," Ali said turning. "The only way this works is if we're quiet. So no talking, no applauding, we don't exist where we're

going. We're just going to watch. I've only been allowed to do it because the people I bring with me and I are well behaved and quiet. Can we all accomplish silence?"

The girls nodded and Chozen felt eyes fall on him. Really? Him? Come on now.

He nodded.

Ali led the way to a backdoor in an alley and Chozen wondered what sort of awful thing he'd just agreed to.

She knocked on the door and it opened.

A big burly guy looked at their group with a frown, but after taking in Ali he stepped aside and let them through.

Chozen half expected the guy to not let him past, but he was allowed in as well.

He followed the girls, Kumiko keeping her hand on his arm like she was scared he'd get lost even though it was a hallway, there were only two ways to go and there was no way he was getting lost. Though he could just turn around and escape, call a taxi and just be free. It was tempting. But she'd tease him for chickening out. He wasn't scared. He just had a healthy amount of self-preservation and spending time with Ali and Jessica was only one rung below hanging out with the ex-cobras on purpose on the hazardous for his health scale.

He'd heard there were tar pits somewhere in LA, that might be safer then spending time with the ex-cobras.

He was on the fence whether it was safer than spending time with Ali and Jessica.

Ali opened a door and led them up a staircase, she was being as light on her feet as possible. Sneaking.

Clearly they weren't supposed to be wherever they were going.

Chozen was going to end up in jail and he'd say *I was just following a girl who didn't tell me where I was going*. And Ali would bat her eyes and twirl her hair and be gone and Chozen would sit in jail until his uncle realized he was missing which would be days. Maybe less if Kumiko also got out, which she would, before him. But she would for sure let him sit there for 48 hours. Let him just stew. And he'd get yelled at

even though it wouldn't have been his fault.

Ali crossed a catwalk that hung high over nothing and then settled down in the middle of it, sitting and holding onto the bars.

She motioned for them to join her.

Chozen sat down, copying her and hooking his arms through the rungs, looking down.

There was a thick heavy curtain below and lights. Some people were standing below, waiting. The curtains rose and the music swelled.

He'd never seen a musical.

Never seen one from such a view.

There were fight scenes but they were all done via dance.

He pressed his cheek against the bars, watching the actors swirl below, the way their voices rose up in song. It was too fast to keep up with, but he got the story. He got the main points. He could follow along with the flow.

He hadn't ever thought about how dance could benefit fighting. But he supposed Kumiko had because she'd talked Johnny into coming into the dojo for a lesson. She kept trying to talk him into it but he kept telling her no. He didn't see the point. But he could see it now. Maybe it'd be worth learning dance. Might be worth incorporating in his lessons with new students.

When the dojo was ready.

It wasn't yet.

He was determined not to cut corners.

It had to be completely unrecognizable.

Johnny hadn't requested that, but he had to do that. He had to make it safe for Johnny to step foot in again. Which meant every single thing that had made it Cobra Kai had to be stripped away.

There was a couple in the musical below. They kept trying to find a way to be together. It wasn't as exciting as the fights.

He'd been so relieved that they'd been given enough funds to do

everything he wanted, that his uncle was okay with it. They'd gone through everything and got rid of anything and everything with that accursed snake.

They were replacing it with the bonsai. Mr. Miyagi's bonsai. Miyagi-do.

It wouldn't have the same peaceful air as Mr. Miyagi's garden. But it'd be a nice mix between Sato's style and a good memorial to Miyagi sensei. And that made Chozen happy.

Miyagi sensei would exist over the ocean. That part of his memory would get to finally be on the same part of the world as his son. All he'd wanted for the entirety of Chozen's life and probably longer. To be close to his son again, to see him.

Sometimes Chozen got jealous. Angry at the man he hadn't met. To have a parent who loved you so much that their heart broke while you were gone and they waited desperately for you to get back. To have a parent that just wanted you. To throw that away....Chozen couldn't understand that.

There was a fight again. Characters were dropping like flies. Important ones. Chozen frowned, brows furrowed. He had a bad feeling about the plot.

Mr. Miyagi hadn't expressed any interest in teaching. He kept saying no, that he was too busy. *No no, don't want. Students who need me find me. Like strays. Like all the cats at home that need help find people. And I've got my hands full with that and the shop. I helped one and well you've seen my garden. That one ended up becoming two and then those two brought more. Let me focus on helping those harmed by Cobra Kai and help them heal. You focus on creating a new dojo to bring life back into the valley. Sato wanted to be a sensei, and you Chozen, I know my father would be very proud of the both of you and honored.*

Mr. Miyagi, Nariyoshi, he was like that. Not some monster from Chozen's childhood. Some confusing monster who threw back all the love he was given in the faces of those who loved him and then stomped on their hearts before disappearing into the night. Instead he brought Chozen tea and Chozen had mentioned he wanted to try some snack, an off handed comment, mostly to remind himself but then Mr. Miyagi bought it and gave it to him later.

It was a lot of little things. How he brought them lunch sometimes when they got busy and he remembered things. Remembered what

salad dressing Chozen liked, what orders he got from the stores, and always got it for him.

It was somehow worse that Mr. Miyagi was nice. That two nice people were kept apart over nothing. Years and years of pain that could have been avoided.

In the evenings Sato and Yukie and Mr. Miyagi talked. They drank and played games and kept talking. Chozen sat quietly by their side, Kumiko was usually off practicing in another part of the garden, or was talking with Ali and Jessica on the phone about their plans. She'd join them to play games, but she missed the quiet moments where Mr. Miyagi talked.

He talked about Mrs. Miyagi, about the war, about the son he never got to meet. The pain in the air fell over their small group like a thick fog. Regret and pain. Heartache and grief.

It dissipated whenever Kumiko bounded back, to take a break from practice and enjoy some tea or to join them in a card game after the call with her new friends. Chozen was sure she knew, but it was like the addition of another person scared off the deeper topics. He wondered what conversations were startled off or set aside by his presence.

He wondered if they talked about his parents. If Sato ever mentioned them. Sometimes Chozen desperately wanted to know more about them. But uncle had once told him not to bother, to not hurt himself. He didn't even know if they were still alive or dead. Didn't know which answer would make him feel better. He thought his uncle was right a lot of the time, that poking and proding at the wound was bad for him. A terrible idea. He understood that. But sometimes he couldn't help himself. Yet he never asked. Couldn't bring himself to do it. He feared it'd hurt Sato to ask.

The couple met again below and someone stepped out from the darkness. Chozen knew better to call out a warning even though he felt it. There wasn't going to be a happy ending. He didn't know why he'd expected one. He'd kind of hoped there would be one. Real life didn't have happy endings. No one he knew got one. So he had hoped at least in the story playing out below him that there'd be something. But it was a tragedy. He'd had enough of those. So he shut his eyes and just listened to the music fall into a sorrowful sound.

When it was over a hand tapped his shoulder and he looked at

Kumiko.

Her eyes were red rimmed.

She'd cried.

She was sniffing and pulling up at him, laughing softly. "You fell asleep?"

"No," Chozen said.

He wasn't going to ask if she'd cried. She clearly had.

Instead, he shoved his hands in his pockets and followed them down the walk and out past actors and actresses that now flooded the hall, talking. They weaved around them and their costumes back out through that door that led to the alley.

Ali stretched and spun around in the alley.

"Wasn't that great?"

Kumiko nodded. "It was beautiful."

"I never thought of watching a show from that angle before, it was interesting. The story was great."

"Chozen? Did you just sleep through the whole thing?"

"No, but it should've ended earlier."

Ali frowned, "Not a fan of musicals?"

"Not a fan of tragedies. Enough in real life," Chozen said with a shrug.

Ali studied him a little too closely.

He wanted to look away but he wouldn't back down. He wasn't scared of her. He wasn't going to step back or look away.

She stepped in closer look up at him.

"We'll go to one with a happy ending next time," she said.

He hadn't expected that. Her whole body language had been rearing for a fight. Instead she just patted his shoulder and turned. "How about In-N-Out?"

"Yes!" Jessica and Kumiko said looking at each other and laughing falling into chatter about the show and other shows they'd seen.

Chozen followed them to Ali's car getting into the back watching the palm trees pass.

If he focused on the palm trees he could pretend he was still at home.

There weren't enough flowers to be Okinawa if he lowered his gaze. Not enough stray cats. Not enough US military. But that last one was kind of a relief.

It was nice not to hear the helicopters, to listen to drunken men, to have to teach them. Because he wouldn't be, well he might be. Sato was for sure. But Cobra Kai had taught people like Johnny and Johnny wasn't military.

Chozen hadn't ever taught non-military.

Who would he be teaching? Kids?

What was he supposed to do with kids?

He wasn't like Johnny.

Kids didn't like him.

Yuna had kicked him in the shin the last time he'd seen her. Her little mob of kids that she was in charge of was also a pain. She reminded him of Kumiko when she was younger. Popular, charismatic, and prepared to make Chozen's life hell if he got on her bad side.

Trying wasn't good enough.

Maybe he'd get flowers for the dojo. Maybe he could get some shiisa sent over. Bring a little bit more of Okinawa over.

There was a knock on his window and Chozen blinked, they were in the parking lot of the In-N-Out and Jessica was looking in at him concerned. She motioned for him to follow.

Chozen rubbed his face.

He'd been staying up late listening to stories and getting up early and maybe wasn't getting the best sleep. Was distracted. He didn't want to miss anything. He wanted to be a part of everything. He didn't want to be left behind.

"Thanks for waiting," Chozen said. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Jessica said with a shrug. "They went in to make sure there's a table for us. It's kind of busy."

Chozen nodded following her into the diner.

"I remember what it was like feeling all alone here. And I'm sure it's weird because of your history, but the guys make living here less lonely," Jessica said smiling up at him.

A guy gets lost in his thoughts for a few minutes and some girl starts pitying him. Stab him in the chest and it'd be kinder.

"There's a lot to do."

Jessica nodded, seriously. "Oh I'm sure. I've never started my own business on the ashes of another. Not one made of nightmares. I'm sure there's a lot of...well my aunt would say bad energy, that needs to be removed at the very least. Oh, do you need any pots or pottery or anything? I can put you in contact with my aunt to make some stuff. Her place is across from Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees."

"Thanks, I'll ask Uncle."

"I think what you're doing is important. For all the guys, even if things between you all aren't comfortable, I think it's still going to be good that the Cobra Kai dojo is gone so entirely. They won't say it, but I think their old teacher really hurt all of them pretty badly. Not just Johnny and not just Daniel," Jessica said as they headed to the red and white counter. "It might take awhile for them to come around but I think they're grateful."

Chozen looked at Jessica wondering why she was being civil to him, waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the trick. He patted his pockets. He had his wallet, so he could cover the bill if they all left them with the bill and ran, which he wouldn't be surprised if it happened.

"Have you been here yet?" Jessica asked turning to him.

"No."

"You should try the Animal Style burger."

Chozen nodded and she turned to the cashier. "Two animal style burgers, fries and drinks please."

She pulled out her wallet and Chozen realized belatedly when she passed him a paper cup that she'd paid for him and horror flooded his veins like ice. A girl he didn't know was paying for him.

"How much do I owe you?" He asked quickly reaching for his wallet again.

Jessica shook her head, "My treat. From one non-native-Californian to another."

She tapped her cup against his and headed off to the machine to fill up her cup with root beer. He followed copying her choice, confused, still waiting, holding onto the cup so it couldn't be knocked from his hand. He followed her to the table where Ali and Kumiko were talking about school and dance. Ali was talking about dancing at the country club and the different styles she knew the basics of, asking Kumiko questions.

"The dojo would be the best place to practice, I could for sure give you a lesson," Kumiko said.

The mirrors were still on the dojo walls because Kumiko wouldn't let him take them down. She wanted to practice with them. She kept saying what a waste it was to take them down, even though there was paint all over them, even though she'd scrubbed at them to try and prove they were salvageable and it'd just made it worse.

He'd tried to tell her that everything had to go. Everything had to be rid of, they were only keeping the bones. He tried to stress how imperitive it was to get rid of everything that held an ounce of the old place.

"If I offer to open up the dojo and let you host a class will you let me finally take down the mirrors?" Chozen asked quickly in Japanese.

Kumiko blinked at him and pursed her lips, speaking in English. "No, you can't."

Chozen sighed pinching the bridge of his nose.

"What did he say?" Ali asked.

"He wants to get rid of the mirrors."

"Aren't they covered in paint?" Jessica asked.

"Yes," Chozen said.

"He also offered to open the dojo so I could give a lesson."

"Let's do that, and then we can tell you whether it's worth keeping or not," Jessica said.

"But-" Kumiko protested.

"I also would like to see what the dojo looks like now."

Chozen couldn't believe his ears. It almost sounded reasonable. Like they might side with him.

He doubted it.

They were Kumiko's friends.

Which mean they were Daniel's friends.

Which meant they couldn't be his friends. And that was okay.

He didn't need friends. But not having enemies was better. Though he didn't trust it. He refused to trust it. He heard their number called and got up quickly to get their food, taking his drink with him and setting it on the tray to carry it all back.

It was the least he could do since Jessica was treating him. It was also the only guarantee that nothing happened to the food or drink. He sat down setting the tray down between them and ate, listening to Kumiko try and explain why the mirrors should be kept and not winning her argument.

It was...satisfying.

Conversation turned to hobbies, things they were all picking up in school.

Kumiko had joined a hiking club and had plans to try and hike Mt. Fuji the next time the mountain opened which excited Jessica who went rock climbing for fun and Chozen looked at her again. These girls were all dangerous weren't they? The amount of upper body strength needed for rock climbing...he was going to just disappear if he made them upset. Never seen again.

He ate while they talked, looking out the window at the palms. He wondered if Johnny was having fun where he was. What Newark was

like? Cold? He bet it was cold. Why would anyone want to live somewhere cold? They probably didn't have palms.

Kumiko pinched him.

"Hey!"

"Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"You keep thinking about him, stop it," she whispered in Japanese.

"I can't help it, also how the hell can you always tell?"

"Because you look...you look like Aunt Yukie used to," she said.

He stared at her.

He was not Aunt Yukie. Not even close.

He wasn't some woman who was going to spend a good chunk of her life crying. He wasn't going to cry. He never cried. He hadn't ever since he showed up on Sato's doorstep. He only almost had when he'd lost against Daniel and Sato had come angrily up at him, but had hugged him instead of yelled at him. Uncle had apologized for all the years of darkness. All the years of distrusting the world. All the years of honor that wasn't honor. For not fully being there for him.

To him Yukie always looked heartbroken. He wasn't heart broken. He was just waiting. He wasn't going to go down to the water all the time and pour rice in. He wasn't going to cry when no one was around. He wasn't going to stop living. He wasn't going to stop growing and changing and becoming more...he'd read it in some book Kumiko was reading that he borrowed for the flight...self actualized. He was offended. Highly offended. He wasn't that tragic. Was he?

"What the hell did you say to him?" Jessica asked. "He looks upset."

"I told him he reminded me of my aunt."

Jessica laughed softly. "Yeah, I could see why he's offended then."

"I'm just worried," Kumiko said playing with the paper that had covered their straws.

Worried? About him? Why? It wasn't like he was doing anything

dangerous. He wasn't training to hike mount Fuji in the summer. It wasn't like he was starting fights for the fun of it anymore or because he was bored. He just liked someone who liked someone else. That was the most mundane problem to have and none of her business.

Or when he was busy painting the dojo and working did Uncle Sato and Aunt Yukie and Mr. Miyagi talk with Kumiko? Did she know about his parents? Was she worried because of-no Sato wouldn't talk about him. Not like that. He didn't want anyone to pity him or his family and he wouldn't do that to Chozen.

"Lets go to dojo," Chozen said. "They can see, you can teach."

"Alright let's see how you've changed it," Ali said leading them back out to the car. "I used to go by and watch practice at Cobra Kai."

"You did?" Jessica asked. "What was it like?"

Ali drove as she spoke. "Their teacher, Kreese...*Their sensei* taught like it was a military class. At first it was kind of cool to see them in their gi's moving so concisely, every move was ordered and perfect. They moved together. But that's because I didn't know. I didn't know that they broke bones that they were hurt so badly in their path towards that perfection. I just didn't like the way he barked at them, the way he spoke to them. It seemed like he was supporting them, trying to help them and I thought it was kind of cool, the way he like puffed up like a rooster full of pride of his students, but then there was a moment it switched, where the things he said just didn't sound quite right, where the words he used were similar to the ones he had been but it was like he was slowly trying to shift them into a more dangerous point of view. That it was them versus the world as if there were enemies around every corner and that's just now a good way to live you know?"

It kept you safe though. But Chozen really didn't want to agree with Kreese on anything ever.

"Honestly, very glad it's gone. That guy was bad news."

"It sounds like there's a lot of that around here. It's so boring in Ohio. It's almost like a Scooby-doo mystery here all the time, that or just Johnny and Daniel bring it with them."

"Oh! I thought that too!" Kumiko said leaning forward. "Okinawa is very peaceful but it wasn't while they were visiting."

Peaceful for *her* maybe. When all you did was teach kids traditional dances and go dancing in Naha you had a peaceful life.

"Alright, Chozen, show us around," Ali said parking her car in front of the dojo.

Chozen looked around getting out and heading up to the steps, digging the keys out of his pockets. He'd already taken down the snake on the outside and all the signage. That had been his satisfying. He got to paint over the snake. To go around finding all the cobras in the shop and destroy them.

Now he was waiting for Mr. Miyagi and Sato to agree on a design for the bonsai. He'd studied Daniel's gi and the design Mrs. Miyagi had made and had also stared at Johnny's red jacket and the bonsai patch.

He'd worn it one afternoon and Chozen had put his hands on the jacket focused fully on the patch.

"Oh right, you're redesigning right?" Johnny had asked. "I like this one."

He'd bent his head to look down at the patch as well and Chozen hadn't noticed how close they were until Daniel had told him he couldn't steal that jacket off of Johnny. Ranting about how that jacket was Johnny's and how much work went into that patch.

"He's looking at the patch," Johnny said. "He's got to work on the logo."

It was fascinating to watch how Daniel instantly backed down. Like only a gentle couple of words and all that fight, all the concern evaporated. He still was a pain, but he'd come over, leaning over to look closely at the patch, sharing his opinions on the design. Comparing it to the late Mrs. Miyagi's. And Chozen hated that Daniel had good ideas, had a good eye for it. Hated that he was incorporating Daniel's notes.

Chozen unlocked the doors and stepped through. It smelled strongly like paint. Overwhelmingly like paint. The dojo at home was dark while Kreese had painted the walls white Chozen had painted them blue. He'd started the sketch of the bonsai on one of the walls and he'd forgotten about that, shit. He hadn't even let Sato look at that. He had asked him to give him time to try and figure it out for a couple of weeks while he bickered with Kumiko over the mirrors. Maybe they wouldn't notice-nope they were beelining towards it.

"What is it?" Jessica asked.

"It's a little unclear," Ali said.

"It's not important," Chozen said. "Go, study dance."

He tried shooing them away from the sketch on the wall but they were focused, stepping close looking up at it curiously. "Oh! Is that supposed to be Johnny's bonsai?" Kumiko asked.

How? How did she do that?

"It is!" Jessica said.

"I haven't seen his bonsai that often," Ali said. "But it is definitely a tree. Who drew it?"

"It's just a sketch," Chozen said. "It's not done. Just testing."

"You drew this?" Jessica asked as she and Ali spun to look at him.

He turned his back to them picking up his tools. It was a blend. It was partially Mr. Miyagi's bonsai, that's what it'd started as, but it'd turned into Johnny's bonsai. He'd thought maybe no one would notice. But of course Kumiko had.

He still had a lot of work to do and maybe he'd do it while they danced.

He still had to figure out the typography for the sign. Something that would draw in the locals and would show off that they were powerful but *not* Cobra Kai. Something that felt like Miyagi-do. Something that would make Miyagi sesnei proud. He kind of wanted to hide some fish somewhere. Paint a few of Miyagi sensei's favorites. He wanted it to be something to honor him. To remember the roots. Maybe he'd hide fish in the roots. Maybe he'd hide a man in a fishing boat and some pieces of Okinawa in the tree or somewhere else.

He wasn't sure. He had too many ideas and he didn't want to mess it up. It'd be part of their first impression with students.

There was a lot of stuff to get done.

He'd painted Sato's dojo when he was little. Lugging around paint cans bigger than him. Sato's students offered to help him but he told them no, he could do it himself. He didn't need any help. He didn't want any help. Never had. But now, well he cared a lot more. And before

his uncle would've told him if it was bad, but his uncle was gentler now, and that was why he wanted to wait until he was done and he was proud of it.

He'd already sketched out the bonsai at least 15 times. It helped that it was at Mr. Miyagi's because he could study it in person now. He could watch the way it moved in the breeze, the way the sunlight hit the leaves. He'd seen plenty of bonsai, Miyagi sensei's place was always full of them but now now this one was the most precious to him because it was going to mean so much.

"It's good Chozen," Ali said. "When are you going to start painting it?"

"I'm not sure I like it yet."

"You gotta just start, if you don't like it can't you just repaint the whole wall?"

She made it sound easy. But that was hours of work, it wasn't like erasing a failed math problem. It wasn't a quick do over. He wanted this to last. He wanted this to be his own chance at starting something new, turning over a new leaf.

He turned, arms full of the brushes and paint cans he'd set out that were now tripping hazards for girls planning to dance and looked back at the silvery ghost of a sketch on the wall. He was proud of it, but he also didn't like it. It'd taken days and the thought of painting it now, he was scared to ruin it.

"Didn't you want dance lesson?" he asked moving things aside and motioning towards the paint covered mirrors.

"Yeah yeah, that can wait," Ali said waving her hand dismisivlly. "What colors are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Like I said. Not done."

"Well green of course, and brown, but like isn't part of Miyagi's design the setting sun? Are you going to do a sunset?"

"I don't mean to be rude but how is a tree going to really sell Miyagi-do? Like I get it's important to Mr. Miyagi but aren't you trying to get students and take over the void left by Cobra Kai?" Jessica asked.

"It's stable. Lives long life," Chozen said.

"But like isn't it like a school mascot? Whose the fighting bonsai trees?"

Chozen set his stuff down to the side biting back a sigh.

"It represents the long connection to the roots of the craft," Kumiko said. "Plus it's defense only for Mr. Miyagi. But you're not teaching defense only right Chozen?"

"It's both, but without Cobra Kai's strike first. Defense heavy."

He'd found so many pamphlets in the office about the Cobra Kai creed. Enough pamphlets that he was sick of it. He'd taken them home to Mr. Miyagi's and burned them in the fireplace. He brought marshmallows to test out the thing the miliatary men always talked about fondly. S'mores. He made some for Kumiko, Yukie, Sato and Mr. Miyagi. It'd been nice. And it'd also felt good to cook something sweet on the ashes of something that had hurt people he cared about.

"Do you want help?" Ali asked. "I was in cheerleading. I've made and painted plenty of signs."

"Oh and I've done thousands of these little bonsai motiffs for the shop," Jessica said turning.

They looked so excited.

How did he politely tell them no?

It wasn't some community after school project to beautiful a community wall. This was suppose to- oh god they were all looking at him in that puppy dog eye way.

He turned away, dragging drop cloth away from the mirrors he'd tried to clean for the fiftieth time hoping maybe they'd be less paint covered so Kumiko would stop bothering him about it but it was like Silver had cursed them to remain dirty and unclear as his revenge.

He hated it all.

"You can paint over it all later but come on this is perfect," Ali said hand on his arm.

"Thought you wanted to dance," Chozen said.

"How about we let Chozen work more on the outline and dance and then help him if he needs it after?" Kumiko asked walking past him

and grabbing the radio that she'd found while digging around in all the stuff left behind.

That had taken days. Just to clear out all the junk. Chozen had sold a lot of it but Kumiko had held onto the radio. He didn't understand why she kept trying to hold onto things left behind from Cobra Kai. She'd seen the fight, she'd heard the stories, why didn't she view it all as cursed like he did?

She plugged it in and took off her shoes stepping onto the mat in front of the mirrors.

That meant he had to work on it huh?

He did not want to do that, not with people there.

He sighed grabbing a ladder and dragging it over to the wall.

He heard the click of her turning on the radio and classical music began to play.

He climbed up to the top and sat and staring at the wall.

He didn't know what to do.

He took a deep breath. He could do what Johnny did. What Sato did.

He closed his eyes. He thought of the bonsai in Mr. Miyagi's garden. The one Johnny held so carefully in his hands. The way it looked in his hands, the way it looked on that patch he wore. Different bonsai's of course.

Johnny was teaching his to grow in a different way. He was working on it with some different goal in mind and Chozen needed to meld it all together.

Mr. Miyagi's bonsai and Johnny's.

He opened his eyes and studied the sketch on the wall.

That hadn't helped. He didn't get it. But he did know what he could work on. There were a lot more leaves that needed to be added.

He dragged his pencil across the blue wall, sketching the leaves onto the tree, working his way down adjustting the shape of the limbs, the arms of the tree and the curve of the trunk.

He could hide things in the bark.

It might be good with the kids. Tell them something deep the way Miyagi sensei liked to. As if everything in the universe was connected and there for a reason. As if everything happened for a reason.

He hated that, but kids liked it. And maybe they could make that cool for the miliatry guys that he knew would start showing up over the summer.

California had a lot of boot camps. The miliatary already explaineed that they'd ship their new recruits to Sato and Chozen to teach, to meld early on in their career and in their lessons. Something about the usefulness of the meditative techniques on calming them in the midst of battle. But Chozen didn't trust it. Wanted to branch out, hah, and become a part of the community.

The truth was he didn't want to go home. He liked Okinawa but without Miyagi sensei there, without Sato, knowing that Johnny was an ocean away everything felt empty. It was cold despite the summer heat. He wanted to go home and visit but he wanted space and an excuse to travel back and forth.

He wanted to live in California and this was his best shot and he had to make sure everything was perfect and that included the damn bonsai on the wall. It included figuring out the font and every choice he made possibly gave him a future or took it away.

And what happened then? If he failed? If he didn't take everything forward and settle in as Miyagi-do? Would Cobra Kai come back?

He couldn't allow that. He couldn't let them have a foothold. A chance. Everything had to be destroyed.

He needed this. He needed a chance to be near people and have his own life. He needed....a chance to step out of his uncle's shadow. He needed space to breathe. To figure out who he was. Because he didn't know who he was on his family tree. He didn't know if his temper came from his mother or father. He didn't know if he had one of their eyes, their nose, any of that bullshit people cooed over babies. He didn't know any of that. All he had was the future and he wanted it so desperately that those damn leaves had to be perfect.

The music stopped and he glanced over. They were doing ballet.

Kumiko was showing them how to stand and the girls were wobbling

and laughing. They were having fun even though they kept falling over. Carefree. Because they weren't worried about their futures. They could do what they wanted or at least they knew what they wanted to do, their dreams.

"Let me switch songs," Kumiko said walking over and flipping the cassette over in the machine.

"Okay okay, we suck at this, Kumiko just show us what you've got," Ali said after she fell over again, sitting up on the mats with a sigh.

"Are you sure?" Kumiko asked. "You can get it, it just takes time."

"Put us out of our misery, just show us a routine," Ali said slumping back down onto the mats in defeat.

Chozen wondered how many times he'd heard that tape. She'd brought it with her to practice when she wanted, or to just have fun dancing to. He was honestly surprised it wasn't some pop music, something more recent. But she seemed to like songs without words. And he watched as she danced for a couple seconds, the start to a routine he thought he had memorized himself because he'd seen it so many times before turning back to the bonsai. Pencil back to the wall, sketching it out feeling a little more at ease.

He chewed on the edge of the pencil looking it over again.

He could maybe paint.

He could start.

He'd brought a small can of paint up with him up the ladder and he carefully pried the lid open with the edge of his pencil and dug around for the brush from his stuff. He stared at it, brush dipped in green. He didn't want to mess it up but he was no chicken. He wavered. He leaned forward and made a stroke. Not that hard. He just has to keep doing that. Again and again. He could do that.

After about an hour he stopped and set his paint brush on the paint can and felt eyes on him. He turned to look down at the girls who'd snuck over to watch.

"I didn't know you were so artistic," Kumiko said.

"Those are some impressive leaves," Jessica said.

"Looks like he doesn't need our help," Ali said, "Except maybe on this. Kumiko those mirrors are awful. You gotta let them go. You looked distorted in them. There's no way you can teach a class with distorted mirrors."

Kumiko sighed, shoulders slumping. "Yeah, you're right. They look pretty bad."

"I'll get a few new ones," Chozen said.

"What! Really?" Kumiko said looking up at him in surprise.

"Few, not nearly as many. Not whole wall. Military men like throw one another around. Break too many if have whole wall. But if you want to teach when in town, then we can have some. But, Kumiko-chan these mirrors are expensive."

"How expensive are they?" Ali asked.

"Very expensive, I think that's why *Imouto* wanted to keep them. So-what, what is that look?" Chozen asked frowning.

Kumiko was staring up at him wide eyes.

"You said *Imouto."*

*"*I did not."

"You did too."

"Did not."

"Did too."

"What does imouto mean?" Ali asked.

"He called me his little sister," Kumiko said.

"I didn't."

"You definetly did," Jessica said a smile breaking across his face. "Oh, how about we get iced tea from the cafe down the street, and then we'll come back?"

"I like that, you want anything *nii-san*?"

Chozen felt his face burn and quickly turned away. "Tea is fine."

Kumiko laughed and headed out the door with the girls.

Chozen took a deep breath gathering up a different color of paint and going back to work. He went to work trying not to think about, how even if she was teasing him, that it was kind of nice that that bickering had created a bond. Little sister felt right said out loud.

There was a knock on the dojo windows and Chozen looked from branches he was painting. There was a woman the door and she looked familiar. He didn't know who she was though.

He carefully climbed down and walked over opening the door.

"Chozen? I'm Mrs. Douglas. I work for the Under 18 All-Valley tournament, since your dojo is new I wanted to personally bring you all the paperwork so that once you get students you can get straight at it, mind if I come in?"

"Uh, okay," Chozen said stepping out of the way.

"You know I never came in here while it was Cobra Kai. Now that I know everything that I know I think Mr. Silver submitted all the paperwork before they even opened quite awhile ago. That or he had his lawyers do it for him. It looks nice, oh are you painting the bonsai! I always thought that was the neatest dojo design."

Chozen stood awkwardly wondering if she should be speaking to Sato instead.

"Do you think you'll put up Daniel and Johnny's trophies?"

"I didn't teach them," Chozen said.

"True, but they are students of Miyagi-do right?"

Chozen nodded.

"You know I heard what happened to Johnny's second place trophy, we had it fixed, the problem is I don't know if he wants it, or if it'd be something to put up in here. You know let sleeping dogs lie and all that."

Chozen did not know. What had happened to Johnny's trophy?

"His trophy?"

"Oh, his teacher snapped it in half because he hadn't won first place.

From my understanding Johnny protested that second place was still okay and then Kreese...well he tried to kill him right in our parking lot. Oh if I'd been anywhere nearby I would've bashed that man with my bag and called the cops. I'm glad Mr. Miyagi was there to save him."

"I'll ask about the trophy," Chozen said.

He couldn't see why Johnny would want it if it was so marred with a near death experience. Chozen wouldn't want it, but it wasn't his choice to make.

"You know some dojo's put up photos and stuff of their students. I brought some and newspaper clippings if you want them."

How many times could he say *I didn't teach Daniel or Johnny* until she understood?

But he was curious.

They walked into the office and she set her bag down digging around. He'd gotten a new desk for Sato, unsure if Sato would be staying or leaving but he figured there needed to be a desk there anyway. She pulled out a stack of papers.

"This is the paperwork needed to be a part of the All-Valley, if you're on good terms with Jimmy I recommend asking him to help you go over it. Turn it in before the summer and you'll be all go to go," she said patting the top of it. She pulled out a little baggy of grapes. "Want some?" she asked.

Chozen shook his head. "No thank you."

"Aha, found them, so these are the press clippings from Daniel's win the first time," she said putting the newspaper down. "And look, there's Johnny with his second place trophy before Kreese broke it. He looked pretty happy for a moment don't you think?"

Chozen looked at the photo of Johnny after the tournament in his black gi, you could tell he'd fought hard, was sweaty. He looked relieved, not happy. It was in the eyes. He was smiling but it didn't reach his eyes.

If Chozen didn't know Johnny, if he hadn't seen what his real true smile looked like then he'd agree. He'd think Johnny was pretty pleased with his second place trophy.

He did want to see more. "What else do you have?"

"Well we did take photos of Daniel's win against Mike Barnes. So we also have those. But I figure...that one, maybe no one wants it."

Chozen had to agree there. That had been a brutual fight to watch, prolongued torture was what it was. Barnes had played with Daniel using the rules to his advantage to not gain a point and toy with Daniel.

It'd pissed Chozen off. Daniel was a good fighter, though he'd probably never tell him to his face. But to watch someone do something so dishonorable for the fun of it? The whole orchestration of the event had been terrible.

He flipped through the photos of Daniel looking exhausted and beaten down to holding up his trophy relieved and proud of himself. Even that one might dredge up bad memories. Chozen wouldn't tell Daniel, barely would admit it to himself, but he also wanted the dojo to not bring up any of those bad memories for him. He wasn't just clearing out Kreese, but also Silver.

"How about something lighter?" Mrs. Douglas asked. She dug around and pulled out photos of a bunch of kids in white gi's. Chozen's eyes snapped to a young blonde with blue eyes smiling warmly at the camera.

"Johnny?" Chozen asked pointing at him. He knew instinctively that was him.

"Yeah, and that one is Jimmy, this one's Bobby, Dutch, and Tommy. This is from their first year. Each of the dojo's send their student classes and we put them up on the walls in the hall. Cobra Kai had quite a few and we...well unanimously when we banned Cobra Kai decided to take them down. Also I liked those boys so I've got a bunch of photos from their tournaments," she said pulling out an envelope and dumping the photos on the desk.

He went through them watching the ex-cobras grow up over the years in their gi's. That warm smile only fully on Johnny's face near his sensei or his friends. It wasn't as bright as it was now, but it was there, the start of it. He looked so proud holding his first first place trophy. Chozen wanted to hang them up. Even if they were for a different dojo. Maybe he could buy some markers and put them in a glass frame and then sketch a bonsai over the emblem. Maybe he could just black it out with ink.

"You want to keep them?" Mrs. Douglas asked.

"Yes. Will figure something out," Chozen said.

She smiled at him, warmly, opening the bag of grapes and taking one then holding it out to him. He took one popping it into his mouth. It was frozen. It was kind of nice on the hot day in the hot dojo. She patted his back. "Welcome to the Valley Chozen, I can't wait to see what you accomplish. I'm going to leave my card. I'm happy to help if you need anything."

"Thank you," Chozen said following her out. "I appreciate it."

He went back to the office. He had other things to give Jimmy. A stack going where he was waiting to gather his nerves. He'd found so many papers, so many papers. Scribblings of Kreese's lesson plans that involved dangerous ideas. Silver's ideas and plans for Daniel. All of it made his stomach churn, but Chozen didn't know how to contact Jimmy to hand them over. He'd need it for the trial. Evidence. He'd have to ask Kumiko or maybe Jessica would hand them over for him. She seemed closest with the guys. She seemed, nice.

Chozen organized the stack for Jimmy in the office then climbed back up to continue painting while he waited for the girls to come back. He wouldn't finish that day but it'd be okay. Ali had said something about watching a movie at her house that evening and Chozen was looking forward to it.

"Chozen, you coming?" Tommy called.

Chozen stood on the steps of Mr. Miyagi's house looking at the van. Wasn't there some warning they gave children in the USA about getting into strangers vans?

"No, I'm going to dojo. Lots of work to do."

"Dude! You can't spend forever in that place. We promised Johnny we would look after you."

"And that we'd be nice."

"Daniel really chewed us out after last time. We promise we won't, like we won't tease you about Johnny okay?"

"Daniel was fucking pissed. He lectured us for like an hour straight. I don't think he took a breath."

"We did insinuate Johnny was easy. Daniel said that any slight on Johnny's honor could end up in a fight. A bad one."

"Listen man, we fucked that one up. Johnny's not like that."

"Not saying you should trust us. I mean you're not forgiven and you're still a shit for hurting Johnny, Daniel and Mr. Miyagi-"

Chozen took a step forward looking at Dutch who was sitting in the drivers seat. "And you haven't ever hurt anyone? Haven't ever accidentally hurt someone? Didn't mean to hurt Johnny. Accident."

"Yeah you *accidentally* knocked him out."

"Better than him trying to interrupt the fight. Or watching the fight. I did that to protect. Doesn't hurt. Want to see?" Chozen asked moving his hand up. He didn't trust that van full of young men. He was not going to go anywhere with tricksters.

"Hey you-!"

"*Dutch*," Bobby said, tone full of warning.

"Oh, now you're going to try and be a pacifist now? Huh Mr. I got into a fight last weekend?"

"You know that bakery is fucking shit and they should be closed, but they keep trying to steal my parents recipes and the owner had the nerve to disrespect my little siblings," Bobby said darkly before turning to Chozen. "Johnny was worried you'd spend all your time alone or in the dojo and he said and I quote 'No one should spend all their time in there. It messes with your head. Please make sure he doesn't lock himself in the dojo and be nice.' So we're here."

"Already went out. With girls. No need," Chozen said.

Kumiko was out with them again, he told her he was going to meditate in the garden with Mr. Miyagi and Sato because she had the same worry Johnny did.

He'd waited until she left and of course, as soon as he thought the coast was clear, no girls dragging him out for another movie marathon, which had been fun, but he had work to do, then the guys

showed up.

He had the worse luck. Even if he had things he wanted to ask. Even if he was carrying around the documents Mrs. Douglas gave him in the hopes of running into Jimmy so that he could ask him to look it over. Even if he had a pile of stuff for Jimmy in his bag. He was working up his nerve and it wasn't there yet. That was for if he ever ran into Jimmy alone. He figured that was more equal. But a van full of guys gunning for him was not good odds.

Was this how Daniel always felt?

Maybe he owed Daniel a more sincere apology.

"That doesn't count," Jimmy said. "You gotta have some fun, not just do whatever it is Ali wants to do."

"Besides I heard that you all just went back to the dojo yesterday," Tommy said.

"Heard the same thing," Dutch said nodding. "So that doesn't really count."

"Just get in," Bobby said. "We can go to a game, do you like hockey? We can go to a museum. We can go to the beach, have you been to our beaches yet?"

"I grew up on an island," Chozen said with a frown.

He doubted the coast of California, that their beach, were better or even held up to the beaches in Okinawa.

California had Johnny and the people he cared about at the moment, but not much else he thought that would win out against the beauty of Okinawa.

"Okay, even so, I can never get tired of the beach, and neither can Tommy and he has a beach house," Dutch said.

"Oh, I got an idea," Jimmy said leaning out the door. "We promised Ms. Lawrence we'd swing by and visit and help her with stuff. She wanted to put in a pond and we told her we dug the pond at Mr. Miyagi's and put that together and she said if we really wanted to we could come and knock ourselves out."

"Oh, I forgot about that, good memory Jimmy."

"Honestly surprised my brains not mush after finals," Jimmy said.

Go to Ms. Lawrence's house. See her, see maybe more photos of Johnny, maybe hear more about Johnny, maybe see what a Mom is like. Even if it was a trap, even if it was a lie he couldn't pass up that opportunity. Not to see and observe the woman who raised Johnny, not to maybe understand a little bit more of what he didn't have.

Chozen nodded. "Okay. I will help Ms. Lawrence."

Jimmy nodded moving out of the way into a seat further back and patting the seat he vacated. "All aboard."

Every fibre of Chozen's being told him it was a terrible idea but he *wanted* to go. And that made him step forward and carefully climb into the van. He turned to shut the door, feeling a sense of finality, of foreboding as he shut the heavy door blocking out the brightness of Mr. Miyagi's garden and house.

The inside of the van was actually clean.

He expected to step his feet in wrappers of take out. He expected it to reek of dirty laundry, weed and beer. But instead it smelled clean. It was better cared for then he expected from looking at it on the outside. There was plenty of space and there was pop music playing on the radio. Chozen buckled himself in and sat tensly as Dutch drove off.

The drive to Ms. Lawrences home was uneventful. Nothing happened. No one opened the door and pushed him out. No one pranked him on the ride over. It was mundane and boring. It was a relief. But he still worried as he followed them up the steps.

"Hey Ms. Lawrence, you wanted some help digging the pond?" Jimmy called pushing open the door.

They just walked in. Like it was their home. Not like Ms. Lawrence had her own life, she could've had a gentleman over, some suitor. She seemed like the kind of woman to have suitors and not dates. She could've been having an important business meeting over the phone that they were interrupting or a luncheon with some fancy person. Despite that he still followed them in. He was too curious not to.

Her home was nice and bright. She was sitting on the couch hair up in a messy bun with with a bunch of pamphlets around her. "Hello boys," she called looking at the pamphlets then looking over the back of the

couch taking in the fifth person, him. "You can't bury him in my backyard."

He hadn't thought of that.

"Wouldn't even dream of it."

"We're not that evil."

"Are you sure you want to dig the pond? It's not even a big pond I want made. I can afford to pay professionals. Really," Ms. Lawrence said.

"We had fun digging up Mr. Miyagi's pond," Dutch said walking past and towards some sliding glass doors that he flipped the lock on.

"Happy to help Ms. Lawrence," Jimmy said.

"Plus we brought Chozen. Figured if he's spending all his time inside working he might as well do some outside work too," Tommy said clapping Chozen's back on his way out.

"Ms. Lawrence," Chozen said bowing, following but wanting to stay, wanting to sit next to her.

Her garden was beautiful. It wasn't the same as Mr. Miyagi's. Mr. Miaygi's was a Japanese style garden. Minamilist and beautiful, calm and peaceful. Lots of greenery.

Ms. Lawrence's garden was where all the flowers he'd missed upon stepping off the plane at LAX had gone. Everything was blooming and the air was thick with the scent of flowers. The trees were in bloom, the shrubs, and flowers.

He stopped, suddenly taking it all in, breathing in the floral scented air. There was a shed in the back of the garden and the guys were getting out tools that reminded Chozen for a moment, a slow terrible moment of destroying Miyagi sensei's vegetable garden.

Johnny had asked him "*Isn't this your heritage you're destroying*?" when he'd come to destroy Miyagi sensei's home.

He'd been so mad. So furious that Miyagi sensei had died. That Miyagi sensei not only had died that Mr. Miyagi had come in and taken up the space and that all focus had shifted to him. That suddenly Yukie saw Sato and Chozen as the bad guys even though they'd been there.

Even though they'd been the ones to check in on Miyagi sensei for years. Even though Miyagi sensei had been so important to them.

Chozen had viewed him as family. As a step in for a grandfather, something he hadn't had. And he'd died.

The kindest nicest person who never flinched when he got mad, when he snapped, when he didn't know what to do with all that anger.

Miyagi sensei had been the one to find him sitting on the old docks absolutely furious because the other kids were doing things for children's day with their parents, that other kids had koinobori flags and he didn't. No one was happy or celebrating that he existed. But Miyagi sensei had found him and had taken him fishing. He'd been the only one to give him kashiwa mochi and shiikuwasa juice.

No one else had bothered. They'd eaten it on the boat and Miyagi sensei never asked why he was upset, just let him be mad, let him be bitter and angry and never told him to behave or to let it go. Eventually the fire fizzled out and he enjoyed the moment and the ricecakes with red bean jam.

Sato was usually too busy. But Miyagi sensei had been there. A gentle hand on the top of his head, then his shoulder, and eventually on his arm when Chozen grew taller than him. He only was chided when he and Kumiko fought. But there was never any bite to it. And when he died it was like a vast hole in his chest.

It wasn't fair. And while Sato grew even more bitter Chozen grew angrier and it fed off one another. Like an out of control wildfire and in the moment Chozen hadn't cared. Why shouldn't anything still stand while the man who inhabited it, who'd given it so much life no longer walked the halls or breathed in those spaces? Why should the vegetables grow when he wasn't there to care for them? What was the point?

Why honor the ancestors of Miyagi sensei, the previous sensei's when their brightest star was snuffed out?

He'd regretted it later. When he'd nearly lost his uncle. When for a very awful hour he thought he had. That he was finally alone in the world because Yukie would go with Mr. Miyagi and Kumiko hated him and he liked Johnny but Johnny wouldn't stay and Chozen wouldn't blame him. And he didn't know what he was going to do. He didn't know CPR or how to check on someone and had just thought in horror that that was it. That just like his parents, just like Miyagi

sensei a terrible horrible storm had come and taken his uncle with it. And he'd just been so tired and scared. Tired of everyone leaving and dying.

He'd been overjoyed when Sato had returned, stumbling in with the help of Mr. Miyagi. But then very very suddenly the table had turned. Sato had changed sides. And Chozen hadn't proved himself. He hadn't been brave or courageous. He'd let himself be scared and feel pity for himself and his uncle had turned his back to him for the first time in his life. Breaking what he thought had been the strongest promise, the only strong sturdy promise in his life. That they were family and unlike his parents Sato would never turn his back to him. And he had.

Desperate was how he'd felt. Part of him thought about leaving. That if Mr. Miyagi had wormed his way back into Sato's heart then despite all the terrible stories maybe it'd be better for Chozen to disappear along with the storm. But he couldn't do that to his uncle. He couldn't be another person who left. It'd been a bad idea but it was the only thing he knew to do to get welcomed back. To be the one with the death match. And if he'd lost, if Johnny had been wrong, if Daniel had won and killed him, then so be it. It'd been worth the risk.

Was it his best idea? No. Not even top five, ten or twenty. But grief compounded by the pain of abandonment made it feel lucky that he hadn't made even a worse plan. More drastic.

When had been the last time Sato had given him a hug? Before that fight, before the storm? He'd remembered being so stunned, so shocked that he'd puzzled it over, trying to remember unable to place the last time.

"Here you go," Tommy said handing him a shovel.

Chozen took it.

He'd expected them to give him a comically small shovel, a spade, but it was the same as theirs.

Bobby was unrolling a piece of paper, a landscaping design of the garden. They were pouring over it, discussing how big it was, how deep it was supposed to be. It looked fairly simple.

Shoveling and gardening was something he was confident in. It was what he'd spent most of his time doing ever since the death match. Helping the villagers rebuild after the storms and helping their gardens thrive. All he did was work in the dojo or in the village.

Unless he felt the need to send something to Johnny. Then he started collecting notes from the villagers, translating their words for him and Daniel, collecting things for care packages from his uncle and aunt Yukie.

Sometimes it was because he'd seen something. Usually ads for the aquarium. A pang of jealousy of the fun it looked like Daniel, Kumiko and Johnny were having. A pang of regret because Johnny's arm was still in a sling and knowing that was his fault. That that was immortalized on all the ads they kept releasing.

At least in the fashion magazine he'd seen at the konbini with Johnny on the cover he wasn't wearing the sling. He'd never purchased a magazine so fast, wondering when and where and how. Aunt Yukie had explained when he'd brought it with the tea she liked, happily taking it and flipping through telling him about the business cards Johnny had gotten and how Kumiko had taken him and Daniel around to do all these fun things.

They sat together, drinking tea and reading it. She talked about the last time she'd talked to *Johnny-san* on the phone. Worried over how the new shop was going and all the strange things happening in the Valley. She recommended he collect the photos and send them to Johnny. So like an obssessed stalker Chozen went back to the konbini and bought another copy to send to Johnny and Daniel, avoiding the gaze of the person behind the counter. It wasn't that bad. He could've bought more. Could've explained, *I know him, I have to send him a copy*. But he refused to explain himself. Just glared. But it didn't feel as potent as it used to.

It didn't help that there wasn't anything behind it. He wasn't really angry, or as angry anymore. Sato and he had talked, like actually talked, a real conversation rather than stories and lessons, for the first time in his life. They talked about the changes Sato wanted to make in the company, how he wanted to be better and what did Chozen think was missing? What could be improved for the both of them?

Sato had said that he'd played games with Mr. Miyagi and Aunt Yukie and that'd been a lot of fun. Chozen recommended they keep doing it. That if they continued to isolate themselves to protect themselves that they'd fall into the same bad habits. He told his uncle that he thought the games would be a good first step. And that they should visit the people they cared about, now that they knew where they were. They should visit Kumiko in Tokyo and watch her performances with Aunt Yukie and they should visit Mr. Miyagi.

Sato had agreed smiling at Chozen warmly. "When did you get so smart? I guess you always have been. I'm so sorry Chozen. We both have a lot of work to do."

And they did, helping out with the village that no longer was Sato's. They went to work buying back things that were from Okinawa but had been sold. The fishing boats stopped and Sato focused on his dojo, focused on spending time with Aunt Yukie and Chozen. Working along side him in the fields or bringing him green tea. Things were getting better, healing. And Chozen felt better. Tentatively. Because good things never lasted. He was toeing his way forward, testing the ground with each step forward.

"Wow, you boys have gotten a lot done. I've made some lemonade," Ms. Lawrence said.

Chozen glanced up from the spot where he was digging and watched the guys clamber out grabbing the icy glasses. There was one for him to and she held it out on a tray. He reached but his hand was caked in dirt and he pulled his hand back. He rubbed it on a clean spot on his shirt.

"It's fine Chozen," Ms. Lawrence said taking the glass from her tray and holding it out to him. "Do you guys want to come in and take a break? Abuela just brought me, oh I forgot what it was, it sounds like a shell. Kind of looks like one now that I think about it. Right! Conchas. I've got a whole lot of conchas. I asked her if she robbed a bakery and she told me she made them all. Something about how her kids were visiting and how she liked to have freshly made conchas for when they visited and then thought maybe I would like some. She really is the absolute sweetest. I need to ask Johnny if he's had them. I feel like he probably has because he spent a lot of time in her shop growing up even though I was completely unaware. Anyway, you can come in if you want, don't worry about the dirt. It'll give me something to do. Being divorced and rich is surprisingly boring. I have to find my own entertainment and with Johnny out of town and Jessica out for the day I'm pretty bored. I haven't cleaned in ages, I kind of want the challenge."

"Ms. Lawrence, you could just hire someone," Jimmy said.

"I could, just like I could've hired someone to dig that whole pond you all dug for me, but sometimes just like you liked doing it yourself I like doing things myself too. I mean I did a lot on my own before I met Sid. I took care of myself and Johnny and it wasn't easy but he

says I'm a great mom, even got me a mug," She said pointing to a coffee mug on the kitchen counter that said world's best mom. "And I think he truly means that. And that is the best thing."

"You are a good Mom," Dutch said walking past her and into the kitchen and looking at the colorful bread, the top of which was cracked. It did look kind of like shells.

"Thanks," she said taking a seat on one of the bar stools.

Chozen took a sip of the lemonade, looking around the kitchen. It was very sweet, and cold, and a little sour. He set it down and went to wash his hands at the kitchen sink.

"So what do you usually drink on hot days in Okinawa?" Ms. Lawrence asked him.

"Tea."

"Ah, Mr. Miyagi makes a lot of green tea. Like that?"

"Also corn tea, uncle likes corn tea. Aunt Yukie likes sanpin."

"Sanpin?" Ms. Lawrence asked, "What's that?"

"Jasmine tea," Jimmy said.

Chozen turned to look at him. He shrugged. "I had to learn for the family business."

"Oh, I'm going to make a note of that," Ms. Lawrence said looking around the counter, leaning over and grabbing a pen out of a jar and a scrap of paper. "Yukie likes jasmine tea and Sato likes corn tea. What kind of tea do you like?" she asked turning to look at him.

Chozen shrugged. He'd liked the tea Miyagi sensei used to make. But he always tapped his nose and said it'd been a secret. His secret tea. Chozen was pretty sure he'd never know what that tea was, it'd died with him. He'd tried to go through Miyagi's kitchen once to try and find it but he never had.

"You've got to have a favorite," Ms. Lawrence said.

"I do, I just don't know kind," Chozen said softly.

"Where'd you have it?"

"Miyagi sensei's."

"Well we can just call Mr. Miyagi then and ask."

"No, not Mr. Miyagi. *Miyagi sensei*. Late Miyagi sensei," Chozen said taking another drink of the lemonade.

"Oh. I didn't realize. I suppose I should've."

He could feel her eyes on him and then she leaned forward and he got whiff of a sweet perfume, her hand gently on his shoulder. "Chozen, I'm sorry for your loss."

Chozen looked at her startled. She was sincere.

He looked away, brow knit, kicking around at the ashes of his anger to hope for a spark of something to burn up the lump in his throat. All he managed was a bitter. "Thanks."

No one had talked to him about Miyagi sensei. But he assumed no one had known how important he'd been to Chozen. And with everything going on. With the death match between uncle and Mr. Miyagi, between the storm and Daniel and trying to make things better no one had...he'd put a candle in the water for Miyagi sensei but he hadn't talked about him.

"Want to talk about it?"

She was dangerous. A witch. But her hand was gentle and so were her eyes on him. He couldn't look at her. She motioned for him to sit and he did, sitting next to her at the bar. Tommy set a colorful concha in front of him and he picked it up, carefully ripping a piece off and tasting it. It was sweet.

"Miyagi sensei..." Chozen felt that lump return. How did he say anything? What did he say about him? He tried prodding around at the ashes, hoping for some ember he'd overlooked but everything was just dust. "was the very best."

"A fisherman?" Ms. Lawrence asked.

"Yes," Chozen said.

"Did he teach you how to fish?"

"He taught everyone. Whole village."

"Did he teach you karate?"

"Uncle taught, Miyagi sensei honed."

"Do you like karate?"

Chozen hadn't ever thought about it.

"I ask because Jessica talked for an hour yesterday night about your artistic skills. She says they're very good."

Chozen couldn't believe she'd-oh who was he kidding he should've known they wouldn't have kept that to themselves.

"It's not great."

"Nonsense. Jessica works with artists, she's got a good eye. She's not going to compliment you without reason."

Chozen shoved more bread in his mouth. He drank some lemonade.

She was waiting.

"Working at the dojo is expected. Now it's helpful. Art is just like...meditation."

He'd only gifted art to someone once.

He'd drawn the sunset once, sitting on the docks while Miyagi sensei was out, because he'd gotten bored and hadn't wanted to go back home just yet and he liked sitting on the docks. He'd drawn what he'd seen. Miyagi sensei peacefully fishing at sunset. He'd given it to Miyagi sensei and he'd never talked about it again. He thanked him for it and Chozen forgot about it. Until he'd been helping Aunt Yukie go through Miyagi sensei's things and had found it, framed in a room he never seen in a spot he'd never looked. It'd been like a gut punch to see it again.

"Ah, Miyagi sensei loved that," Aunt Yukie told him. "Said it was his favorite piece he'd ever gotten. Never said who the artist was. I wanted to get him another, but no one signed it."

They'd found a lot of art from the kids in town. Little notes from the kids he'd taught, but only Chozen's was framed.

"Then you should make time for it," Ms. Lawrence said. "You shouldn't just work all the time, you should also do things you want to do.

We're all very grateful that you bought the dojo and took over. I don't know what your plans are but you should also take time to enjoy yourself Chozen. Or else you'll find yourself looking back and wondering if you'd ever had fun."

He drank some lemonade and nodded. She patted his hand.

He didn't think he could handle that much more focus on himself. He needed her to pay attention to someone else. He needed to take all the jumbled wires of his frayed emotions and feelings and sweep them back into a box and lock it again.

"Have any of you boys heard from Johnny?" she asked.

"No," Bobby said shaking his head. "I didn't ask him to call this time since he was going with Mrs. LaRusso."

"I kind of thought he'd call, at least once," Ms. Lawrence said with a frown. "I think I freaked him out before he left."

"Over what?" Jimmy asked sitting down next to them with his lemonade and grabbing a concha.

"I told him not to let them bully him. But I don't, maybe he wasn't even worried about that before he left."

"We could call," Tommy said.

Ms. Lawrence looked at the clock. "They're probably busy."

"I doubt it's a problem, do you know the number?"

"I do," Bobby said grabbing the phone and dragging it over, pulling the cord along with it setting it down on the counter. He dialed and then adjusted to speaker phone, setting the receiver down. They listened to the dial tone and then the click as someone answered.

"LaRusso residence, you've reached Lucille, who can I put you in touch with?"

"Oh Lucille! Johnny never called to let me know you all arrived okay, I wanted to check in and see how it's going?"

"Laura! Oh he's fine. He's got a small army of children totally enamored with him now. My in-laws adore him and there was a bit of a spat earlier but both Nonnia and Nonnio put their foot down immediately. I swear I thought Nonnia was going to start disowning

people left and right." Mrs. LaRusso laughed softly into the phone. "Daniel took Johnny out to get him a jacket and gloves and a hat, poor boy didn't have any."

"I should've taken him shopping before you guys left," Ms. Lawrence gasped. "I'm so sorry."

"Oh no, it's fine. Daniel was more upset with himself. Honestly he and I have been fighting more than anyone else. Johnny's been very sweet about the whole thing. Did you know Daniel got into a mechanic's apprenticeship and business school? To open a business and just ditch it, I swear I didn't raise him like that. He essentially is dropping the whole shop onto Johnny's shoulders. They both say they're fine with it but it just isn't fair to Johnny or Mr. Miyagi." Mrs. LaRusso sighed. "We talked about it some more and I get why he's doing it, I just feel bad. Your son's done enough, he doesn't have to take over Mr. Miyagi's shop too."

"Aunt Yukie can help," Chozen said.

"Chozen?" Mrs. LaRusso said sounding confused.

"Ah, sorry Lucille, the guys came to work in the yard and I mentioned I hadn't heard from Johnny so they called and put you on speaker."

"Oh, hello boys."

"Hi Mrs. LaRusso!"

"I suppose if Ms. Yukie also helps I'll feel a little bit better," Mrs. LaRusso said thoughtfully. "But really she shouldn't have to. Daniel should clean up his own messes."

"She likes working in bonsai shop," Chozen said.

He liked the idea. Plus if she did, then maybe she'd stay. And if she stayed then maybe Sato would also stay. Maybe they could all stay. And just go home sometimes. Rather than back and forth. Then he wouldn't be alone in LA.

"Do you want to talk to Johnny? He's probably around here somewhere. He's the only blonde so he's fairly easy to find, sticks out. Plus he's a giant. Let me see, hmm not in the kitchen, no I'm not talking to you, let's see living room, hi Nonnia no it's Laura and the guys, oh oh okay, Nonnia wants to say hi. She's going to pick up the phone in the living room with Nonnio. I'm going to be back I'm going

to see if he's next door."

"Laura!" a woman said excitedly. "How are you? How is LA? Did you get the jams we sent?"

"I did, it was really sweet thank you. You have something coming up soon. I hope Johnny's been good."

"He's a delight, you've raised a very sweet boy. And you'll have to come with next year."

"I would love to."

"Actually," a mans voice said coming through. "We were thinkin' of visiting California some time. It's clearly now Daniel and Lucille's home. It's been awhile since we've traveled so far, but it'd be nice to visit and see all the places they talk about."

"And the food."

"Of course Tesoro, there's a lot we want to see and eat and lots of people we want to meet."

"How is your garden coming along Laura?"

"Well Johnny's friends came by today and did all the hard work of digging up my pond."

"Oh how exciting! What are you going to put in it?"

"I'm thinking koi and some frogs. Maybe some lotus and lilies, not fully certain yet. Johnny usually helps me pick things out. He's got a good eye for flowers."

"It sounds lovely. I can't wait to see it."

"Thank you. I look forward to meeting you in person,"

"Laura?" Mrs. LaRusso's voice came back. "I've got Johnny. He's covered in glitter." she said with a laugh. "He was helping the kids make some surprises, I won't say what since I know Nonnio is listening. Here you go Johnny I'm going to put the phone just like that, you got it?"

"Yes, thank you Lucille," Johnny said.

Chozen leaned forward a little.

"Bye Laura, nice talking to you."

"Bye dear," came Nonnia voice.

"Bye." Laura said.

There was a click and silence.

"Honey?"

"Hi Mom."

"You having a good time? Are they being nice to you?"

"I'm-they've been nice. I just wish I'd brought a gift."

"Can you even hear yourself think over there?" Dutch asked.

"Yes."

"How many LaRusso's are in that house?" Bobby asked.

"I don't know. Over twenty. But I gave up on counting."

"Where are you staying?" Jimmy asked.

"Across the hall with Daniel's godfathers and Lucille."

"How's that?"

"They're nice."

"Are you exhausted?"

"Kind of. Hey, you guys checked in on Chozen right?"

"I mean ask him yourself. Did we check in on you Chozen?" Bobby asked nudging the receiver over.

"They've behaved?" Johnny asked.

"So far," Chozen said carefully. "Your bonsai is okay. Mr. Miyagi's taking good care of it."

"Thank you Chozen," Johnny said.

Chozen pressed his tongue to the top of his mouth hard to stop from saying something stupid. It was bad enough Kumiko knew. It was bad

enough to have her teasing him. He didn't need these guys to tease him even more. And they knew. Or kind of knew and he didn't want to deal with that. He wracked his brain for something smart to say back. Something cool. But he couldn't think straight, he was nervous. He never got nervous. Not like this.

The guys were talking to Johnny, Ms. Lawrence was talking to him and then they were saying goodbye.

"Bye," Chozen managed to say with the others.

He felt like finding water and pouring a bag of rice into it. Was this how Aunt Yukie had felt? It was awful. Mushy. He could carry at least a ten pound bag of rice at least, make it seem less pathetic. Though he might upset some water police or something. With his luck he would. He could just imagine tossing a bag of rice over his shoulder, finding some dock or pier and dumping it into the ocean to wish Johnny a safe journey and then having to run from some angry water police officer. Just sprinting with rice going everywhere. And then with his luck he'd get attacked by gulls. Sorry Johnny. The feeling would remain in his heart but the urge would get stomped out.

They finished their lemonade and the conchas and went back outside to finish digging the pond.

Chozen wondered what it was like at a household of LaRusso's. He wondered if Johnny was having fun, covered in glitter from hanging out with the kids. He could imagine that easily. He was good with kids. Chozen wondered if he could ask Johnny to teach him. Chozen didn't have a clue on how to interact with children. He'd need all the help he could get. Because unlike at home he needed to *not* scare them off. And at home scaring them off usually benefitted him. They left him alone. But here he wanted to teach them, needed the dojo to be a success.

It was the only way he could say thanks. The only way he knew how. To Daniel (though he'd never say it to his face, at least not any time soon), to Johnny, to Sato, and Mr. Miyagi and Miyagi sensei. He didn't know how to say it otherwise. But proving himself at the dojo, proving that he could teach and could be trusted to be a good role model to kids. That would do it. He'd live up to the legacy of his Miyagi sensei. And he hoped would make him proud.

The pond was finished before Chozen knew it and they walked back into the house to clean up. After getting most of the dirt off of himself

he wandered around curious. It felt a little rude but the other guys just wandered around like it was their own house. He supposed it'd be different for him no matter what, but he looked around while he had the opportunity.

He found a guest bedroom that looked cozy and had Jessica's things in it. He saw climbing gear and a big poofy pink jacket hung up in the corner, a book she was reading with a mountain on it and a pair of dirty hiking shoes in the corner.

He tried another door and found Ms. Lawrence's room.

It was cozy and understated. There were fresh flowers on the counter. He didn't know what kind they were but the collection of them were beautiful. She had a stack of books on her bedside table and a vanity with light bulbs around the mirror like he'd seen walking around backstage with the girls after the musical. It was similar with a ton of make up and brushes sitting out. Hanging up was a beautiful gown.

He closed the door and tried another.

Linen closet. Boring.

He went to the next one. He found a boys bedroom. Johnny's. He took a step in, carefully. There were a lot of books. A ridiculous amount of books.

He studied the shelf looking for *Tales of Genji*. He looked for his gifts. But they weren't there. Not the sake set, not the books he'd sent as a holiday gift, not the photos, not the letters, not anything. He felt a momentary pang of disapointment. But then remembered he'd seen all of that. In Johnny and Daniel's room. The sake set had been in there, so had the pictures, the magazine he'd sent, the charm, the *Tales of Genji*. All of it had been with his stuff and he'd seen them at Johnny and Daniel's new apartment. The sake set on the shelf, the books on the bookscase. Of course they wouldn't be there. Johnny didn't live with his mother any more.

He did see a lot of photos though. Chozen looked at the photos on the wall. Johnny with his friends, his mother, people Chozen had met recently and people he hadn't. There weren't a lot of photos of him when he was little.

It was like he hadn't existed before.

Chozen had a lot of photos but they weren't happy.

Chozen rarely smiled for photos. It seemed silly to smile, why smile when a serious look matched his uncle better? But now he kind of wished he'd smiled more. Or had photos of him and Miyagi sensei. Or a photo of his parents. He didn't know what they looked like. He didn't know if he matched them at all or if he'd grown up looking strange and different so you could never tell because he'd never seen them? Maybe he couldn't have grown up to look like them without seeing the blueprint.

Ms. Lawrence leaned against the door and watched him and he refused to touch anything.

"You seem like you're trying very hard," she said softly. "And I appreciate that. I appreciate you trying to be careful with Johnny. I know you didn't mean to hurt him. But you did."

"I know. I have no excuse."

She nodded. "But I also don't want you to torture yourself. He really does love Daniel."

Chozen frowned. He knew that. Johnny smiled very brightly when he looked at Daniel. Like a magnet he was drawn into Daniel.

"I can wait, until Daniel dies."

"You're kind of stubborn aren't you?"

She said it with a smile. Like it wasn't a bad thing.

"I will help him recover when Daniel dies. Don't worry, I won't steal him."

He would however just prove that he was a better choice every chance he had. He'd let Johnny make that decision himself.

"I appreciate that," she said with a laugh. "I can see why Daniel's been worried. But if you have an opportunity to love you should, you shouldn't wait 70 years or more for Daniel to die."

She seemed worried, how did he explain that he was okay?

"Ms. Lawrence, I am a sunflower."

"A sunflower huh?"

"Sunflowers spend whole life turning to face the sun. They never meet

the sun, they never touch it, they just bask in the light of the sun and grow and bloom. To me, Johnny is the sun."

She walked in and gently wrapped an arm around his shoulder. "You can grow and bloom on your own. Don't spend your whole life just working and waiting for Johnny to turn around. Because he's going to check in on you and he's going to be nice to you but he's not going to notice. The amount of girls that fell over themselves at the country club who hadn't given him the time of day when he first joined but did after he bulked up and shot up like a weed was intense. But he didn't notice. He just went through the motions over and over again. I know now that he was just tredding water, just trying to keep afloat. He couldn't see beyond himself and he couldn't think of a future because he didn't have the brain space for it. He was surviving and that was all he could do."

Chozen nodded. He understood that feeling. He'd felt that way. That it was all he could do. Keep moving forward and survive.

"I'm sure it was hard, living alone with your uncle. He probably wasn't ready or prepared to be a parent and I'm sure he did his best and it wasn't perfect. But even if he did his best and had the best intentions it doesn't erase how you feel and that's okay. Parents, even the best prepared ones don't know what they're doing. It's a guessing game and a gamble. We do our best and hope everything turns out right and sometimes we fuck up," Ms. Lawrence said gently. "And I hope you thrive in LA."

"Thank you Ms. Lawrence."

"And I look forward to seeing the dojo when it's done. And the bonsai you painted. Jessica really did say it was beautiful."

"Thank you," Chozen said again.

He took another look at Johnny's room and then followed her out of the room and back out to where the guys were. He supposed he was stuck with them for the rest of the day.

"What will you boys do now?" Ms. Lawrence asked.

"We've got tickets to a game," Bobby said.

"What kind of game?"

"Hockey," Dutch said.

"Do you have something warm to wear? It gets pretty cold watching those games because of the ice."

"We brought our jackets."

"Do you have one for Chozen?" Ms. Lawrence asked.

"Oh, shit I forgot."

"One moment, don't go anywhere yet," Ms. Lawrence said walking over to the phone and making a call.

"Hello, yes may I speak to Jessica?"

She waited smiling at them then turning. "Hi Jessica, the guys are going to watch a hockey game. Chozen doesn't have a jacket, do you mind if he borrows yours dear? Oh, not a problem? Perfect thank you. Will you be home for dinner? Oh? That sounds delightful. Of course, the more the merrier. I'd love to have them over. We can get take out or delivery. Think about what you girls want and we'll get it when you get here. Perfect. Bye Jessica." She hung up and clapped her hands turning to Chozen. "Alright, you can borrow Jessica's winter jacket."

Chozen had a bad feeling about it but waited while Ms. Lawrence left and came back with a pink puffy jacket.

"I know it's not...well it might not fit your style, but it gets really cold at hockey games. You need something warmer then what you've got on and honestly I don't think Johnny's got anything in his closet. Otherwise I'd lend you that, he wouldn't mind, but as you just heard he went to Newark in January without a real jacket."

"Thanks," Chozen said taking the bright pink coat.

He'd have to have it cleaned. He was pretty sure he was still covered in dirt despite cleaning up and his best efforts.

"You boys have fun, thank you for digging up the pond for me."

"Any time Ms. Lawrence."

"Call us if you need anything. We're at the Brown's tonight," Dutch said.

"I will. And you call me if you need me. The girls will be over for dinner."

"Bye Ms. Lawrence!"

"Thank you," Chozen said softly bowing his head and following them out.

She smiled at him, gently squeezing his shoulder and stood on the steps waving.

Chozen got into the van. The sun was setting. It was a little darker even though it wasn't that late and he watched those palm trees pass. Dutch made Tommy who was sitting up front next to him go through a collection of cassettes. He reached over and grabbed one at the red light and popped it in, pop rock. He held Jessica's pink jacket carefully.

"We're going to watch the Los Angeles Kings play," Dutch said.

"You ever watch hockey?" Bobby asked.

"No," Chozen said.

"Do you know what it is?"

"No."

"They skate on ice. Which is why you needed a jacket," Jimmy said.

"We would not have let you go in without one. We would've bought one at the souvenir shop before going in."

"Still can if you'd rather that over a pink jacket," Dutch said glancing at him in the rearview.

"It's fine," Chozen said. Jessica's jacket seemed warm.

"Hey watch it."

"Sorry," Chozen said.

The man seemed itching for a fight. Chozen wasn't short, and he wasn't all twig thin. He was muscular but sometimes, especially under a puffy pink jacket, it could be hidden. The man had friends. four of them. And they seemed equally interested in a fight.

He'd won in worse odds, with his arms held back.

Miyagi sensei was of the belief that karate should be used to defend not to fight. But Sato was of the opinion that fights happen and sometimes you got to defend yourself ahead of time. So he readied himself, bracing for fists, ready to lift his own, ready to end the fight before it began when an arm slung around his shoulder.

"Making new friends already?" Dutch asked.

Chozen glanced at him. He was smiling. He looked like he was ready to fight, like the thought of fighting these men was exciting. Like this was the best gift anyone could've ever given him.

"Can't fight your own battles huh? Need your boyfriend to fight them for you?"

They reeked of beer and were laughing.

Dutch leaned forward, it looked like he was just more into the conversation or wanted to pass a secret across to them, but he was tensing up, coiling, preparing for a fight in the subtlest of ways.

"One he can very well fight you all, probably on his own, but then what would the fun of that be? And two, yeah, so what?"

They looked surprised.

"I think the rules for the arena are that we have to take all fights outside. Personally I'd like to continue watching the game after this tussle ends up with your asses in a dumpster, but I'm ready to roll here or there, you decide. Wanna get banned for at least two weeks or you want to pick banana peels off your shoulders and slump back in here later?"

"Let's take this outside then," the man said.

"Father Bob, you still a pacifist or you wanna fight?" Dutch asked turning his head and calling to Bobby somewhere behind him.

"Never ever call me that again, which I know will just make you do it more and more often, and why not?"

Chozen walked towards the exit steeling himself for a fight, away from guys.

He didn't need help.

He was used to this.

He was used to fighting uneven numbers and winning.

They stepped into the alley, Jimmy testing the door to make sure they could get back in before following.

Chozen turned towards them, waiting.

"I thought you want to fight?" he asked when no one made a move.

The man cursed, seemingly realizing that the odds were no longer stacked in his favor and still zeroed in on Chozen.

Chozen waited, the man swung, a big swing like a man who expected his target to stand still and just accept being punched in the face. It was clumsy and easy.

Chozen sidestepped and watched the man wobble as he lost balance. Chozen swept his legs out from under him and he fell to the ground with a solid thunk and rush of air, of all the air in his lungs being knocked out. That seemed to piss off his friends who circled in.

Chozen braced himself, watching their movements planning what he was going to do, but Bobby, Dutch, Jimmy and Tommy sprang into action, making it an even fight and Chozen watched them fight, the rudimentary pieces of karate, the things they were good at. Bobby was very good, almost on par with Johnny. Dutch wasn't doing karate, it was something else with too many high kicks, it took him a moment to recognize it, taekwondo. And Jimmy and Tommy were doing fine with drunken fools.

Chozen pulled his gaze away and back down to the man on the ground who let out a groan. Chozen knelt down, digging through his pockets for his business cards and set it down on the mans forehead. "I teach karate. Miyagi-do dojo, opening next month. Come if you want rematch, or how to learn how to fight," he said before standing and dusting off his hands.

"They are are playing with you. Like cat play with mouse. Finish your fights. Lets go back to game. Too hot out here for jackets," Chozen said. He was sweating, not from exertion but from the heat of the LA sun under Jessica's pink coat.

It was like dominos, a one two three four as the men were knocked to the ground. Dutch leaned down to haul his up.

"What are you doing?" Bobby asked.

"I told them I was going to stuff them in the dumpster."

"I don't think that's necessary," Bobby said with a frown. "Isn't that a bit much?"

"Fine you party pooper," Dutch said dropping the limb he was holding with a sigh.

Chozen flicked a business card onto the guy's chest just like the others.

"Are you, advertising?" Jimmy asked with a laugh.

Chozen turned to him, putting the rest of his business cards away. Sato had requested them to be thick good quality paper. They had a nice weight to them. In Okinawa they used traditional paper. They hadn't done that here. Not yet. Though Chozen had looked. He hadn't found any artists yet. He might have to do it himself, but they weren't there yet. Maybe after they won a few of those trophies that seemed to mean so much in the Valley, then he'd make traditional paper to print the business cards on. But until then they were fancy.

"How advertise at home. Best kind of advertising. Either they come to fight again, or they come to learn to fight again later. Either way, good for business," Chozen said pushing the door to the auditorium back open. "Coming?" he asked pausing to hold it open for them.

Chozen was used to fighting on his own. He was used to being on his own. His friends weren't that good at fighting, left it up to him or if the fight skewed heavily in their favor. Not really friends. But he kind of liked having people with him. What would've been a couple of minutes of a fight fell down to only a few seconds with no injuries on his own. They were too drunk to get up quickly so they could be back in their seats enjoying the rest of the game. Which was entertaining, because sometimes fights broke out on the ice and people just let it happen. That was fun to watch. And it was easy to follow.

"Of course man," Dutch said patting him on the chest before slipping past him through the open door, followed by the others. It seemed to be a thing, to pat him on the shoulder or chest before walking past. It was a little weird, but it seemed to be in good spirits.

Was it possible they actually didn't hate him? That they weren't going to torture him at every possible opportunity? Maybe, but he also feared that as soon as he let his guard down he would jump. He wasn't going to let his guard down...but he was going to be nicer. Less prickly

as Kumiko told him.

He followed them back to their seats to watch the game. Listening to the conversation around him.

After the game they made their way out to dinner. A local pizza joint and then to a bar. Jimmy said his cousin worked there and they found a table. Chozen sipped at his beer keeping a close eye on it and keeping it close to his body while the guys played pool. It was an uneven group and even though they offered to let him play with them he didn't really see the point. Plus he'd rather keep an eye on his beer. It was decent beer. Not as great as Orion, but he doubted they had that. After a while Jimmy wandered back to the bar setting his finished drink down on the bar and taking the next one given to him by the man behind the bar.

He wondered if that was his cousin. He wondered what it was like to have cousins.

"I get it you know man," Jimmy said sipping his beer and slumping into the seat next to him.

"Huh?" Chozen asked.

"My parents wanted me to take over. The whole shebang. The whole enterprise. I didn't want to. I spent every day of my childhood studying drinks. Who produced what? How did I say it in the local language? How did I write it? I was in tons of lessons. I had to learn different languages. I didn't get a chance to do anything else. Just study study study. And it was all drink related. I couldn't even learn anything I wanted. I wanted to learn history and I wanted to learn how to talk to people. How are you? *Genki desu ka*? But I was learning business language. Not casual conversations. My parents heaped it all onto my shoulders and it crushed me."

"Uncle not crush me."

"Maybe not. But man that expectation to take over sucks. And after Johnny and I became friends I'd go over to his house whenever I'd had it. I'd sneak in through the back way because that was the only way in and I'd cry. I'd be so frustrated that that was all I could do. I could barely breathe sometimes. I didn't want to take over the family business. I didn't give a shit about beer and hops and percentages and what was selling best and flavors and corn syrup versus cane sugar and how things were made and how to import. And Johnny was the only safe island for me to go to.

"It's because there was one day we were talking about family stuff after a Cobra Kai class and we were sitting on the boardwalk eating ice cream and I said I was supposed to take over the family business and he turned to me and he asked. "What do *you* want to do?" No one had asked me that yet. They just accepted the I'm supposed to take over the family business on what my plans were for the future. But no one asked if I *wanted* to do that, or what I wanted. And I'd been so stunned. Because I hated spending my weekends and holidays and after school memorizing things and with private tutors and it'd been fighting tooth and nail to get to study at the dojo. My parents hadn't wanted me to but I begged. I offered to study harder and well I wasn't very good at karate and I didn't get to a black belt before we quit because I had so many other obligations and fell behind but Johnny and the guys didn't care, they still hung out with me and it was just a nice break. For the length of a class a couple times a week I could focus on something else. I could forget who I was. I could become who I wanted, or at least puzzle over who that was. And it was like a breath of fresh air.

"And when Johnny asked that, well I started talking to him about what I wanted to do, I kept throwing out ideas because for a minute I thought he could tell me what I wanted to be. Like he was some all-seeing person who could tell me based on our friendship who I would become. So I'd ask "Firefighters are cool, what do you think?" and he'd nod. "They're cool." "Could I be a firefighter?" "Do you want to be?" And that would always stump me.

"I didn't know. And it was like trying on hats slowly over time. What did I want to do? What did I want to be? Who did I want to be? And I just kept throwing things at him to see if he'd be like *YES that is you!* And he never did and eventually, I figured it out.

"I want to be a lawyer and the path to figuring that out was frustrating and painful. But I like it. It's got a bit of history which I enjoy in it and it's helpful. Especially if you know the system then you can figure out your way around it. It's kind of like being given a puzzle you have to decode and I liked those. I like figuring out how to get a person in a difficult situation out of it. And I can use it for good. And that'd make me feel better than just importing beer, even if it's good beer.

"But I'd go by Johnny's place a lot and I'd cry. Oh, I cried so much. I'd bring beer and we'd drink and I always cried. Because my parents wanted me to be this person I didn't want to be and no one saw me, saw who I was but Johnny did. And I bet you feel that way too huh? That Johnny saw you, through all the," Jimmy motioned drunkenly at

all of Chozen. "The gruff grumpy angry guy you are to see who you are." He poked Chozen in the chest. "And there's something precious about that right? Something about that that you just really like the guy for right? I mean I do. We do. We all do. And it makes my blood boil when people are mean to him. I want to yell at them, grab them by the shirt and shake them and like do you know how this guy works? No? You don't! Because you could've had something great, you could've let him see you for you and he would've supported that but instead, you turned your back to him and you hurt him and, man I get that blood-thirsty feeling to go after his stepfather and Kreese. He's our friend and he's our brother. He's important to us.

"He never told anyone that I cried nearly every time I came over to visit. He never told anyone that I was overwhelmed or that he checked out book after book after book from the library to go over with me. I wanted to be a firefighter? Well even if it was a fleeting fancy we walked past the firehouse together and talked to the firefighters and he got a book on it for me to read from the library and we poured over it together. I thought about being an engineer? He went through the phone book for me one day at my house and called and asked some engineer if we could come and see what they did. And we did. We got a tour and got to follow along with this guy and see how he worked and what he did. Marine biologist? We went and followed some people at the local marine research facility and I got to study things through a microscope and that was so much fun. He knew where everything was and he knew his way around the city and I never questioned it. I never questioned how he knew all these places and how to talk to people to get in. He charmed his way through every door and some of those doors opened so easily for him because of Sid, but a lot of them opened because he knew how to work with people, how to tell them what they wanted to hear. Not that I was some pathetic lost kid given the thought of choice for the first time in my life but I was a student wanting to figure out how something worked, he wanted to write a paper on it. And funny enough I'm pretty sure he did. He got straight A's and I think he wrote probably a million career based papers for our school."

Jimmy was motioning around the bar with his beer. "I was supposed to be here. I was supposed to go to business school and work here in the summers after I turned 21. Before I turned 21 I was supposed to be in the back and washing dishes and loading things in and out of trucks. But I'm free now. And Johnny will say I did it myself. But I have him to thank for it. He opened a door I never noticed because I was too overwhelmed to see it. And you, look at you, you're in LA. Did you think you'd ever leave Okinawa?"

"No," Chozen said shaking his head.

Jimmy spoke too fast. He caught the gist of it, but some of it passed by him like a freight train.

Tommy came back from the game of pool he'd been playing and tapped Jimmy on the shoulder. "You sure you don't want to play Chozen?"

"I'm sure."

"Tommy, you decide what you wanna do? After school? Did it change?"

"Government," Tommy said pulling up a chair between them.

"Politics. Seriously? Wait no. That makes sense actually."

Tommy laughed. "Yeah, I want to make laws that you then have to figure out how to understand."

"Oh I hate you, you're going to make my life hell aren't you?"

"Only with love."

"I'm going to go play. But Chozen," Jimmy said standing, wobbling on his feet a little and patting Chozen on the shoulder. "You can take your own path. Got it? Understand?"

"I do."

"Good," Jimmy said with a smile before waving at Bobby and Dutch and heading over.

"Politics?" Chozen asked.

"Yes," Tommy said. "I was in student council, I liked it. Hey, I know I didn't make the best first impression, but, like you, we really fucked up, and sometimes we overcorrect in the wrong way. We overcorrected and maybe chose the worse way to go about it. But like today was fun you know? I hope you had fun. And we know you're trying. It's kind of hard you know? Trying to make things better and also feel better about it. I mean I don't feel better but it helps to have support. Like Bobby's got great support so he mostly bounced back and I.... Listen, I don't know what your life is like, but mine. My parents...I live with my aunt and uncle and they're great and they're wonderful but they don't replace my parents and that hurts. And I

wonder, would they have caught on faster than my aunt and uncle did? Would I have listened if they had? I like to think I would've. But it's kind of hard, you take things for granted when you have them and when you don't, well you just, there's a lot of wishes."

"Your parents are gone?" Chozen asked.

He hadn't meant to ask. He hadn't meant to stick his finger directly in a gaping wound but it was so close to his own that he couldn't help it.

Tommy blinked looking at him a little surprised then glancing away. "Yeah, they died."

The only honorable move after sticking a finger in a wound was to share his own. Even if he'd never said it out loud, even if he didn't want to, and struggled to get the words out despite the beer and buzz in his system. "Mine abandoned me."

Tommy's head snapped back up looking at him eyes filled with concern but understanding, it wasn't the same. It was different. Tommy's parents hadn't left him because they wanted to. They probably desperately wanted to stay with him.

"Uncle raised me. Don't know if alive or dead. Just gone."

Tommy nodded looking down into his own beer.

"I'm sorry."

Chozen scoffed a dry humorless laugh. "Americans and their I'm sorrys. You didn't cause."

"It's sympathy. You know."

"I know," Chozen said taking a sip of his new beer. "Miyagi sensei, late Miyagi sensei was nicest to me. Now also gone."

He also hadn't said that before and hated that he'd said it. Hated that he was opening up. It had to be the beer. Sneaky beer.

"That really sucks man. If you ever, well it's not the same I know it isn't, but if you need to talk, no joke, no trick, I'm here. Mr. Miyagi's got my number, you give me a call okay?" Tommy asked reaching out, hand on Chozen's arm.

Chozen nodded. He believed him even though it wasn't the safest idea. Even if it could hurt him in the future, he wanted to believe him. And

he felt, maybe for the first time in a while, not as alone as he had been.

"Oh! Tomorrow Johnny and Daniel get back, we were thinking of taking the bonsais over before they arrive, surprise them. Do you want to come with?"

He didn't want to part with the bonsai, but he'd get to see Johnny again and he would like that. He dragged his fingers through the edge of the glass, through the condensation. "I'd like that," Chozen said softly.

He hadn't realized it, but in less than 24 hours Johnny would be home. He'd be back to seeing him at lunch, at the shop, and soon the dojo would be done and it'd be better and Chozen would prove that he could be trusted, he wouldn't fail.

"You know, there's a way to play with everyone. Or you could at least come and join the conversation," Tommy said.

"Okay," Chozen said. He stood, holding his beer close, and followed Tommy over to the pool table.

"Chozen!" the guys drunkenly cheered when they saw him come over.

It was nice. They weren't there because of money. They weren't there because they needed something from him. They didn't have to do anything.

Chozen wouldn't have said anything if Johnny had asked. They could've done the bare minimum. But they hadn't and he was there, with them and it was nice. He could flourish in LA he thought, maybe.

Chozen held Johnny's bonsai carefully in his arms on the ride to Daniel and Johnny's apartment.

Bobby had the other one and was talking about possible surprises. Leaving cakes in the fridge or moving everything just a couple of inches over to mess with them. He didn't think any of it was a good idea. And he doubted they'd do it. But he followed them through the familiar parking garage and to the elevator, saying hello to the security guard that knew them and heading up to the room.

Bobby had a key and opened the doors.

Chozen stepped through.

It was weird to be there when they weren't. Little pieces of Johnny around. He wanted to know what book he was reading, where was it sitting and how far had he gotten before he'd left for Newark? Was it a library book or one he owned?

This time of day Johnny set the bonsai in a spot where they got good sunlight and that was the table in the dining room near the bedrooms.

"Ah!"

Chozen set the bonsai down and startled, stiffening.

That was Johnny. He was home. He was hurt. He never made sounds when he was hurt. So it had to be bad. He had to be really badly hurt.

Where was he?

"Just like that, you've got it, beautiful. Just a little more, almost there."

Daniel?

He didn't sound panicked.

What was wrong with him.

If Johnny was hurt that badly then it was an emergency.

They were home.

There.

Chozen walked towards the closed door, gearing for a fight, to get the first aid kit, to assess the situation and call an ambulance, whatever was needed to be done to help when arms wrapped around his waist and the ground went out from under him.

"No, you don't."

One quick move and he was over Dutch's shoulder and being carried out of the room. Dutch was moving fast. The guys were retreating fast. The two bonsai sitting close to one another on the dining room table.

Chozen heard another moan.

Tommy's hands clasped over Chozen's mouth, eyes wide, face red.

Dutch didn't stop, practically running out the open door and into the hall, slamming his hand against the button for the elevator. "Shit, that little bastard and his love for coming home early and surprising people."

Chozen squirmed. Dutch had too good of a grip on him and there was no way to unpin his arms. He'd grabbed him in a specific way so he couldn't hit his pressure points.

He had to go back.

Johnny was hurt.

Why were they running?

They weren't cowards. Or at least Chozen wasn't.

Bobby was locking the door, fumbling with the lock, getting it, and sprinting towards them as the elevator door opened and they all darted in.

Bobby and Jimmy slumped down to the bottom of the elevator.

"Oh come on, like we haven't-"

"Shut up Dutch," Bobby said. "That could've been bad."

"But it's fine," Dutch said. "We got this one before anything happened. It's fine."

"We must go back. Johnny's hurt. How could you leave him like that?" Chozen asked trying to get loose.

Dutch was stronger than he looked.

"He is assuredly not hurt."

"How do you know? We didn't check."

"Yeah, not going to open that door. Both of them would for sure murder us."

"Chozen, let's get some ice cream and go to the beach huh?" Bobby

asked looking up at him from where he was crouched, brushing hair from his eyes that were pleading, begging him to just go with them, to say yes to the ice cream, to not demand they go back.

Chozen frowned. He was in no position to argue. At least not now. But when they were in the garage, he could break free, steal the keys from Bobby and run back.

"Stop it," Dutch said smacking Chozen's back. "Stop scheming your grand rescue. Let Johnny have this."

"He's being hurt."

"He's super safe Chozen. Daniel's there," Jimmy said.

Chozen frowned.

"Daniel would not dream of hurting Johnny," Tommy said gently. "You know that."

Chozen looked away from him.

Daniel had always gotten pissed when he thought Chozen had messed with Johnny. It was one of the few things to really get him to snap.

Fine.

He'd just pay super close attention to Johnny later, make sure he wasn't hurt then. And if he was he was going to get Johnny somewhere safe and never talk to any of these guys again or Daniel. Maybe his first opinion of them was right. Tricksters. Evil tricksters the lot of them. But for now.

"He better be okay," Chozen said darkly putting as much venom into his voice as he could.

"Ice cream?" Bobby asked pushing himself up as the elevator dinged.

"Fine. Just put me down," Chozen said.

"Not a chance bud," Dutch said.

If Chozen trusted Dutch he'd think there was concern in his tone. Like he was worried that Chozen was going to do something to hurt himself. Which was silly. Chozen wouldn't hurt himself. He was being gentler than he had to be.

They waved at the security guard again, like it was normal to walk off with a guy over your shoulder.

Chozen stewed angrily.

He could've walked out on his own.

He was going to take them on their word. Because they were acting like...like they were worried about *him.* Not Johnny.

He didn't like that. He didn't need them to worry about him. He'd lived a long time without people worrying about him and now, now *everyone* was worried about him, strangers. Because that's what they were. Strangers. They weren't his friends.

They didn't care, they weren't-

Jimmy opened the back of the van and Dutch set him down gently in the seat, buckling him in like he was a child. "We'll get a lot of ice cream man. Just chill. Don't hurt yourself."

He'd thought right. They thought whatever was on the other side of that door wasn't painful for Johnny but for Chozen. Chozen frowned as the rest of the guys piled in and the door shut. Dutch doing a rotation with his keys around his index finger before starting the car up. "Beach?"

"We're going to create a pavlovian response to the beach if we keep this up," Jimmy said.

"It's hard to be bummed on the beach," Bobby said softly, almost too softly for Chozen to hear but he did hear it.

"How'd we miss the fucking Avanti in the lot?" Dutch asked pointing at it sitting next to the yellow Ford on their way out of the parking garage.

"We forgot Daniel lies about when he gets home," Tommy said.

Dutch sighed. "Yeah, it's one thing if it's just us. I don't mind teasing the shit out of them, but that's not really what-"

"Yeah."

Dutch sighed turning up the music, some musical soundtrack. Chozen turned to watch the palms pass, brows furrowed. They were worried about him. Him. Not Johnny. Johnny was fine. Dutch had said *Let*

Johnny have this. And Daniel had been talking. A lot. Had sounded out of breath. All of the guys had been red. Like they were blushing. Embarrassed. Oh. Chozen crossed his arms over his chest. He knew Johnny and Daniel were together. He knew what that entailed.

He was glad he hadn't opened the door though.

Some doors weren't meant to be opened. And that was one of them. Though now he knew that Johnny did make sounds...during. That was going in a box. And it was going to be politely pushed to the very back of his mind. Compartmentalized.

They arrived at the beach and Dutch hovered like he was ready to chase Chozen down if he ran. But Chozen didn't run. He was fine. They'd introduced themselves with a joke in the same vein, he'd already gotten over his shock on that, this was nothing.

Aunt Yukie had waited decades for Mr. Miyagi. So had uncle. So had Miyagi sensei. Mr. Miyagi had married, had a child, had lived a full life before returning to them. Chozen had seen all the pain the distance caused, he'd watched them wait, longing to see him again. Chozen had learned millions of small lessons from seeing them, watching them. They had wilted without their sun nearby, but Chozen was on the same side of the ocean, he would grow, he would thrive and he could wait. Miyagi sensei had taught him patience. And he'd just flirt, badly, every opportunity, because at least it'd piss Daniel off.

Chozen walked up to the ice cream stand. "Mint chocolate chip please," he said digging out his wallet.

A hand gently pressed on his arm. "Our treat, right Bobby?"

Bobby gave Jimmy a dark look but nodded, putting in their orders and paying for the group. He held his wallet a little longer, thoughtful and then pulled out a small thing of stickers. He pried one off and stuck it on Chozen's shirt. It was a gold star that said good job. Chozen stared at it, then at Bobby.

"Thanks for not bolting."

"I don't run away," Chozen said, taking his mint chocolate chip cone from the worker when they brought it out.

"Well thanks for making a tactical retreat with us," Tommy said grabbing his own cone and heading off to walk along the beach.

Chozen followed along looking down at the star, it had a cartoon face on it. He felt like he was in kindergarten, but his teachers never gave him stickers. He'd never behaved well enough to get any. He stopped after awhile, turning to face the direction of the sun, shutting his eyes and just enjoying the warmth. He could hear the guys talking, they'd stopped walking, were waiting, not rushing him, not asking what he was doing, just letting him be and it was more than he could've asked for, more than he'd expected.

Chapter End Notes

Heliotropism is the word for how sunflowers follow the sun
Concha recipe
Orion beer is from Okinawa and here is a youtube video of a Orion drinking song

Challenge Accepted

Chapter Notes

> Hello!
> I kind of feel like I have to apologize to Jane Austen and for the utter misuse of karate. Additionally uh... in at least one scene please do not try this at home. Right? I feel like I got to include that.
>
> I gave myself two chapters to wrap this story up and what happened was I ended up with a whole bunch of mini-chapters in one big chapter. Who knows how long the final chapter will end up being.
>
> So grab a drink, a snack, get cozy, and prepare for a long chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first stop they made was for Nonnia to talk to all the local vendors and shop keepers she knew, and to talk to her friends and to catch them up on everyone who showed up and her plans for Nonnio's birthday.

It was a lot of talking and normally Daniel didn't mind but it was *long*.

He wanted to get the shopping done and get back home to see Johnny. To make sure he was okay and that the kids hadn't been too mean.

The last time he'd been home they'd been bratty as a group. Individually they were fine, but for some reason as a group they became a mini mob.

"He's going to get eaten alive," his aunt said shaking her head as they collected flowers.

"Trouble already?" one of his older cousins asked.

"No," Daniel said.

"He picked the *worst* task."

"We're going to get home to chaos."

"Or a kid in the ER."

"Johnny won't let that happen," Lucille said stiffly.

"I'm surprised you like him, after everything Louie Jr. said."

Daniel turned his gaze to Louie who was outside waiting, hands in his pockets and rocking on his heels, bored.

"What did he say?" Daniel asked as they left with their flowers.

"He said he was a spoiled rich bully from LA, right Louie?" one of their cousins said as they passed him.

"That was last year," Louie said looking startled. He shrugged. "I changed my mind he's cool."

"One meeting changed your opinion?" Daniel asked feeling a bit of hope.

Louie looked at him surprised, brows furrowed, "He didn't say-? Yeah, yeah he was cool."

Louie was dragged off to another car and Daniel frowned into the chrysanthemums he held.

He sat in the back of a car squished in with his mom and a couple cousins. Their next stop was the mall where they could finally split up. Daniel wondered if he should've told Johnny that it was flowers and shopping and talking to people. All these things he knew Johnny would shine in that maybe his aunts and uncles would stop needling Johnny about dumb things that meant nothing.

"Shit," his aunt said looking in her purse.

"What?" his mom asked.

"I forgot to leave Johnny money for dinner to feed the kids."

"I thought you were doing a trial by fire," another aunt said.

"What does that mean?" she asked crumpling the envelope and shoving it back with a sigh.

"You didn't leave him numbers or anything. Didn't even tell him where to find the kid's jackets or what time they should go to bed or really anything."

"Why didn't you speak up?"

"I figured you were doing it on purpose. You know, see how he reacts to the chaos. It can be really telling. Uncle Elijah cried when we left him alone with them all."

"He did?" Lucille asked with a frown.

"Nonnio is home," another cousin said, patting Daniel's shoulder as they climbed out and wandered into the brightly lit mall. "I'm sure your boyfriend won't be too badly scarred by the time we get back."

"Can you please be nicer to him?" Daniel asked. "I know you're all upset about the sweater, but it's a sweater. And he's been very careful with it. Just like...Moving to California wasn't easy. I didn't make any friends for a long time. I just had a girlfriend and a teacher. And that teacher became my best friend. My sensei. And after the tournament, Johnny apologized. He owed **me** the apology, not all of you. And I've forgiven him. I forgave him long ago. He's more than made it up to me. I know you're all pecking at him, you don't know all the shit we've been through and how much he's helped me. Because of him, California feels like home and I like it there. I never asked him to work in the shop, he *offered* to help. He cleaned the shop and worked for free. His work ethic is better than half of you. Hell, I bet you didn't even realize he fixed the sink that's been leaking for *years*. He's also really good with kids. They like him. Give him a chance, will you? Because I love him and you're going to be seeing more of him if you want to see me."

Daniel sighed turning in the mall, he didn't want to hear whatever they had to say and stormed off to go buy a gift for his grandfather. His mother found him later when he'd given up and was sitting in the food court fiddling with his sweater. It'd been almost a year since Johnny had given it to him. Had let him borrow it and then said he could keep it. It was one of his favorites. She sat down next to him with a bunch of food on sticks. He took his share grumpily and the soda she offered him.

"You okay?" she asked.

"I thought my family would be nicer to him from the start. He's dealt with enough he doesn't need." He gestured around him. "All this."

"They're protective of you."

"I can defend myself and I *have* multiple times. I don't need anyone to

baby me. I can take care of myself."

"I know, they're just concerned. It takes them time, but they don't hate him. Remember that guy who cheated on your cousin Charlotte?"

The family had found out and no one would admit to it but his car ended up in the Hudson and the guy couldn't get into any good Italian restaurant in Newark. They also pretended he didn't exist.

"They haven't done that to Johnny," Lucille said gently.

"But that guy, he cheated."

"And they hate him for it."

"Johnny didn't cheat on me."

"No, they're just adjusting. Plus now that you've chewed them all out, and your Nonnia also chewed them out-"

"She did?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah beat me to it. She's apparently **very** fond of Johnny. Said *I gave him that sweater because he's been there when he wasn't asked to be for Daniel and Lucille and other members of this family. I started it before I met him, before they started dating, because he was going to get a sweater whether they ended up together or not. He's family like Tristen and Moshe. And if you're all jealous over a kid without a big family like ours being welcomed and loved then I've failed to raise you as good human beings.* And then she took stormed off and I swear I've never heard a single LaRusso's stay quiet for so long. Let alone a group."

"Nonnia started it *before* we started dating?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah you really wouldn't stop talking about him," Lucille said smiling warmly and squeezing his shoulder gently. "She figured you'd at least be good friends."

"How'd she know his size?"

"No clue. She has her ways."

Daniel frowned looking at his drink.

"I had an awkward conversation with the guy who ran the shop I went to."

"Yeah?"

"I didn't end up buying anything for Nonnio. I just...talked about Johnny."

She laughed softly reaching over and patting his hand. "We'll head home soon and you'll see him again. Besides your Nonnio didn't want anything from you or Johnny remember?"

"Yeah," Daniel said softly. "I'm ready to go now, was ready like 8 hours ago."

"We hadn't left 8 hours ago," Lucille said sipping her drink.

"I know. I missed him *before* we left."

She smiled reaching over and gently pinching his cheek. "What ever are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Well let's go round up our family so you can get back to Johnny as soon as possible and stop moping."

They pushed the door open to the apartment as quietly as possible. He heard one cousin note how neat the boots were as Daniel added his to the pile and hung up his jacket. He turned to look for Johnny, poking his head through doorways and finding him curled up on the couch reading.

"Everyone else went to bed," Johnny whispered, looking up when they entered.

"All of them?"

"Yeah."

"Have fun?" Johnny asked pushing himself up.

"Not as much as I'd hoped. But we might be able to rescue the evening," Daniel whispered as the crowd continued past them putting things away.

"How?"

Daniel kissed him gently on the nose and then held out his hand.

Johnny looked around and snagged his bookmark off the table and stuck it in the book before getting up and taking Daniel's hand.

"What are you reading now?"

"*Howl's Moving Castle*, the librarian recommended it. It's new."

"You mean it came out this millennia?" Daniel asked looking at the book and then at Johnny in shock, leading him towards the door.

"It comes out in April."

"What? How'd you manage that?"

"The librarian lent me an advanced reader copy."

"So your two reading modes are ancient or not even out yet? Are you sick?" Daniel asked pressing the back of his hand to Johnny's forehead, faux concern in his voice.

"I'm not sick," Johnny said with a soft laugh. Then he remembered something and stopped, turning to Daniel suddenly like he had something urgent to say.

Daniel paused in getting Johnny's jacket and scarf off the hook by the door.

"Is there a library nearby?"

"Did you run out of books already?" Daniel asked.

"Not yet, but I was thinking of checking some out when we visit to read to the kids."

"Oh, the kids didn't scare you off huh? You want to come back?" Daniel teased.

"They're good kids."

"You, Johnny Lawrence, are probably the only person ever to say that about a hoard of LaRusso kids. Careful or else you'll get stuck babysitting forever."

"I don't mind babysitting," Johnny said with a shrug.

"Saint."

"Definitely not," Johnny said with a laugh.

Daniel shook his head amused as they crossed to the door.

"Do we need to say goodnight to Nonnia?" Johnny asked.

"Oh, best not to, she's a little pissed. We'll chat with her in the morning."

"Anything we can do?"

"No, we are perfect angels in her eyes, which means we get to go while everyone tries to get back on her good side," Daniel said pushing the door open leading Johnny across the hall.

"I'm sorry to hear it was such a bad shopping trip. I know you were looking forward to it," Johnny said.

Daniel gently squeezed his hand, then lifted it to kiss the back of his hand. "That's sweet. It'll be fine tomorrow. That or I'm going to start a fight."

"Daniel," Johnny's voice was filled with worry.

"This kind of fight is easy. All words."

"Hey guys! Welcome back!" Tristen called from where he and Moshe were sitting on the couch watching a movie. "We've got some homemade gelato in the freezer if you want some."

"How was shopping?" Moshe asked.

"Not the best round of shopping. I'll let Ma fill you in on that. Johnny babysat."

"And you're still standing! That is a feat!" Tristen said.

"They're not that bad. We hung out for a bit, played games, played out side, had dinner and then I read them a bed time story."

"Daniel, you gotta keep that one. If he can handle a bunch of your little cousins and tame them then he can do anything," Moshe said.

"That is the plan," Daniel said watching Johnny blush, shocked at the praise. He smiled heading off to their room. "Good night."

"Night!"

"Sleep well."

Daniel waited until the door behind them shut to step into Johnny's space, close.

"I missed you," Daniel said, backing Johnny towards the bed.

If he wanted, Daniel knew Johnny would stop and be rooted. He'd be immovable, but he was backing up, like he trusted Daniel not to let him fall into anything. Though Daniel was going to let him fall, let him collapse onto the bed and corner him. Because he was protesting but barely. Like all those ingrained niceties meant he had to be say them aloud . That it had to be acknowledged. Daniel got it. He did. But after such a long day all he wanted to do was spend time with Johnny. Naked.

"Your whole family is just across the hall."

"Not my whole family. Ma's side isn't here."

Johnny's eyes widened at that. Stunned. Perfect timing to just take one more step and, yes, down he went, brow furrowing.

"I knew that but also didn't realize that," Johnny whispered.

"Ma's side's much smaller. So see, nothing to worry about," Daniel said following him down grinning.

Johnny frowned an unspoken *You know that's not true.* But he went for something different.

"Your godfathers are out there."

"The walls aren't that thin. Really Johnny, they're not. No one else would move into the building if they were."

Johnny seemed to mull this over, thinking about the day filled with loud LaRusso's and seemed to relax with the thought.

Daniel kissed him.

He'd told the truth.

He'd missed Johnny all day.

He kept turning to look for him, wanting to show him the things he'd seen at the mall, wanting to get his opinion on flowers, ask what one or the other was. He wanted to hold his hand walking down the street. Hell he almost wanted to stay home and babysit the kids with him. Which was shocking even for him.

He wanted to tell him so much but he also didn't want to take his lips off of Johnny's. Didn't want to stop touching him, especially because he was responding the way Daniel loved, moving to give Daniel space, hands on Daniel, like he too needed to feel skin beneath his fingertips. Like he'd missed Daniel just as terribly.

"We can try to be quiet," Johnny relented when they broke apart for a breath.

Daniel grinned leaning down to kiss him again.

He wanted to try.

It'd be like a challenge.

How quiet would Johnny remain with Daniel's mouth on him?

Would he fall into breathing exercises to try and remain calm and focused? Would he cover his mouth, or just throw his arm over his face? Would he be quiet with Daniel in him? He hadn't managed yet. But there was always a chance. Would the silence bother Daniel or would the valiant effort to remain quiet spur him on? Would it last longer? Or...or was this exactly *why* Johnny usually said no at other people's places? Not out of a lack of adventurous spirit but because he'd request they try and pick something quiet and Daniel would take that as a challenge to get Johnny to make a sound. Because he did. He wanted to hear Johnny make quiet little gasps, to see how he tried to stifle all sounds of pleasure, desperate to stay quiet.

No wonder Johnny always said no at Mr. Miyagi's. But this was different.

Daniel would...no, he wouldn't. He couldn't even lie to himself about trying to be good. He knew what he wanted and he went for it.

He pressed his lips to the side of Johnny's neck, the spot that usually got a good reaction, the ghost of a touch.

Johnny's hand was under his shirt, fingers somewhat cold and sending a shiver down Daniel's spine. Daniel brushed his tongue against his

neck, a plan forming in his head. At the very least he was going to leave a nice mark, see how Johnny could handle that. The feel of Johnny's hands on him became a pleasant background feeling, comforting while Daniel tried to perfect the bruise, listening acutely aware to Johnny's heavy breath.

"Fuck," Johnny gasped. There was something underlying in his tone that pulled Daniel away from his hard work to look at him. He looked like he was struggling to focus, like had a goal in mind but kept losing it, and then his hand was between Daniel's legs, cool fingers that had been reaching and unnoticed until now, finding their goal.

Maybe Daniel wasn't the only one who'd determined this a challenge. Which one of them could remain the quietest? Which one would win? The determined look on Johnny's face made it better.

Daniel kissed him on the lips again, partially because he needed too and partially to not make a sound, not a loud one anyway, because he was damn good with his hands and Daniel refused to lose.

Daniel pulled away from the kiss just barely pressing his forehead against Johnny's trying to calm his breath.

"Did you miss me too?"

Johnny blinked, adjusting his focus to the conversation lost in a haze of lust that sent a thrill through Daniel.

His hand stilled which was less thrilling.

"I did, but it's good practice."

Daniel frowned, confused. "Huh?"

"You're going to go to school, we won't be together constantly anymore."

Daniel had known that, but he hadn't thought about that. He'd just see Johnny in the morning and evening. Maybe at lunch if he was lucky. Maybe he would have to be at school or his apprenticeship late. There'd be studying and stuff that Johnny wouldn't be doing with him. Even before they'd been on good terms they'd still been at school together. He'd probably never get as much free time with Johnny again.

"Oh," Johnny said pulling his hand away, pushing himself up. "You

okay?"

"I didn't realize...I'm going to be busy."

"Yeah," Johnny said.

"I'm not going to see you much. I'll be studying and then I'll be working for other people and it won't be like the shop. And it'll be like that until I retire or until I own my own place."

"It'll be an adjustment, but you'll be so busy you won't even notice."

Daniel looked at him like that was the least possible thing in the world. He laughed dryly. "Not notice you aren't there? I spent at least a fourth of the day looking for you at the mall. I'm so used to having you there, it's kind of...I think I get why Ma was so worried."

"If you're worried, we can talk to Lucille and your godfathers. They might have some advice."

Daniel rubbed at his face. "Damn. How do people do it?"

"I don't know, it's a new everything," Johnny said gently taking his hand.

"Nothing in your books?"

Johnny glances at his book and laughs. "Sophie kind of avoids her responsibilities and gets on a moving castle and lives with a wizard."

"A true role model there," Daniel said amused.

Johnny's hands came up to either side of Daniel's face and he kissed him gently. "We still have a couple of weeks before you start school. We still have summer breaks, winter breaks, fall and spring. It's not immediate."

Daniel sighed. "Yeah, it's just, it's going to suck."

"You're going to learn stuff you wanted to learn."

"I know."

"You're going to meet new people and you'll have so much to talk about."

Daniel laughed. "Okay, you're right. We'll just have to make up for it

in advance and in the evenings and in the mornings."

"Why do I get the feeling you don't mean talking?"

"Different kind of talking," Daniel said gently pushing Johnny back down. Johnny reached up to him, pulling him into a heated kiss. Daniel shifted his leg between Johnny's and grinned. "So the thought of being separated didn't kill the mood for you?"

Johnny flushed looking away. "I missed you too."

"Sorry for making you wait," Daniel said kissing him gently before slipping down between Johnny's legs working on the buttons of his jeans.

There was a knock at the door.

Daniel cursed as Johnny pulled back, away, face red, trying to be presentable for whoever. Those deep breaths. Damn it. Johnny had even held onto the thread while Daniel had lost it and now someone was at the door. Daniel was going to chew them out because he knew when he turned back to Johnny the lust in his eyes would be gone.

What was the point of staying with his godfathers if he couldn't have sex with his boyfriend?

Daniel sighed, running a hand through his hair, going to the door and opening it. He'd expected his Ma or his godfathers, expected to whine at them about privacy and how late it was, though he didn't think that would work. It was only nine. Which was exactly why he wanted to spend more time with Johnny. They could've had sex and then still gotten a lot of sleep, or just had a lot of sex. But the thought track died immediately upon opening the door and having to look down. It was one of his little cousins, standing in his pajamas. The last time he'd seen Christopher the kid had been a toddler.

He was pale and looked scared, eyes darting around. "Can I stay here?"

No. Of course not. Daniel still had plans for the evening. And that specifically did not include guests or family or anyone but Johnny.

"Nightmare?" Johnny asked from behind Daniel.

Daniel glanced at him, damn, all trace was gone. How'd he manage that? Daniel hadn't even really managed to leave much of a mark. Sex was off the table wasn't it?

The kid shook his head while Johnny knelt down.

"What happened?"

The kid frowned. There was no way he was going to say. The kids didn't talk to anyone older than thirteen. They were like a pack of feral monsters. This one in particular had ignored Daniel when he'd said hi when they arrived. Worst cold shoulder he'd ever seen.

"My big brother said if you wake up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night you have to run back to bed and fall asleep in less than a minute or a monster will come and eat you."

"Why didn't you go to your mom?"

"If I told Ma she'd have yelled at him and then tomorrow he'd lock me in the pantry as revenge and I'd miss Nonnio's birthday and Nonnio would be sad. I can't make Nonnio sad."

What the hell?

"What do you want to do?" Johnny asked softly. "Want us to check for monsters?"

The kid scuffed the floor with a slippered foot with a move Daniel recognized from himself. He'd done the same thing awkwardly outside of Ali's house once upon a time, several times since. He'd never noticed that before, habits he thought were his own only to realize a whole bunch of other people did the same thing?

Where had he picked it up?

What was his alone? Were any habits his? Or were they things he'd picked up from his family?

"Sleep here?" the kid asked.

Johnny looked back at Daniel. Damn it. At home it was the guys. Here near his family, even though he'd specifically picked staying with his godparents to avoid situations like this, he still wouldn't be alone with Johnny. Was there a solution? Did he have to move out into the desert? Just pack up the Ford and move into the desert so no one would find them? For a month? A year? The rest of their lives?

He didn't want to share. He wanted to keep Johnny for himself. But he sighed. That claws of jealousy were why he couldn't stay at the shop

all the time. It was one of the driving factors sending him to school and to his apprenticeship. And it was pretty messed up if he was jealous because of a kid who'd just met Johnny after a day of being pissed that part of his family was being awful to Johnny. He should've been happy someone liked Johnny other than Nonnia and his ma.

"Yeah, okay," Daniel said with a sigh stepping out of the way so the kid could come in, leaving the door open because there was no point in closing it now. Was this what it was like to be a parent? He shuddered. Constantly cock blocked. Ugh, he'd probably been that kid.

Johnny was pulling back the covers.

"Do you want a light on?" Johnny asked.

The kid shook his head. "No."

"Why'd you pick us?" Daniel asked trying not to whine, trying to keep the complaint out of his tone.

At this rate there'd be no sex the entire trip. They'd fallen asleep the night before tired from the flight, and now this. Maybe there was something to Johnny's hesitancy, maybe there was some force that refused to let them get that far. Next time they were staying at a hotel. No one would bother them at a hotel and Johnny was more than up for hotel sex or at least had been last time.

The brat settled in in the middle of the bed. Daniel wouldn't even be able to cuddle or hold Johnny in his sleep. At least the guys picked a side.

"You're karate champions."

Ah. They'd kick the monsters ass. Got it. Well that was sweet. Glad someone knew he was a strong bad ass.

"You going to take a shower?" Daniel asked Johnny. They weren't dressed for bed.

"Yeah," Johnny said before turning to Christopher. "You going to be okay? I'll make it a quick shower."

The kid looked at Daniel studying him like he was trying to decide how good his chances were with only one of them.

"Hey, I'll have you know I beat him in a tournament. I won," Daniel protested, offended.

"It's fine," Christopher said.

That tone. How freaking rude. And Johnny spent the whole day with these kids.

Johnny nodded gathering up his stuff and kissing the top of Daniel's head before slipping out of the room. He wasn't even going to kiss him on the lips huh? Going to roll back all the way up to polite general audience with no pda. Daniel sighed quickly changing into his pajamas before returning and looking at the kid. He did look scared.

"There won't be any monsters here," Daniel said sitting down on his side of the bed.

"No?"

"Nope. Tristen and Moshe wouldn't allow it. Very safe. Same with Nonnia and Nonnio's place."

Christopher looked down at his hands, picking at his nail beds before chewing on his nails nervously.

"What?" Daniel asked.

"Does no one like me?"

"Hey, why would you think that?"

"No one wanted to stay behind today with us. I thought maybe Johnny did because, well he doesn't know me or the rest of us. But you didn't want me here."

Daniel sighed. Was he that readable?

"It's not a you problem."

The kid had big watery shiny eyes.

Fuck.

"Listen, do you like Johnny?"

Christopher nodded.

"Good. Me too. You got to spend the whole day with him. I wanted to too. But instead I went shopping."

"But shopping is fun."

"Yeah, most of the time, but I wanted to spend the day with Johnny. Would have preferred it. People weren't the nicest about him and it was upsetting. I'd have preferred to just been here with him."

"We had fun. They weren't nice about him? I guess...Ma says he was mean to you but he doesn't seem mean. Maybe everyone's confused."

"I guess," Daniel said with a sigh. "But he's my favorite, so I want them to be nice to him. But I'm sorry, I just wasn't expecting a guest. I was going to bite off anyone's head on the other side of the door. And the family, it's not you, they didn't volunteer because they wanted to go shopping."

"Johnny volunteered though."

"Yeah, because he's kind."

"But he was mean to you?"

"Yeah we had the worst meeting and misunderstanding," Daniel said turning to glance at the kid again.

The watery look was gone and he was staring at Daniel wide eyed. "What happened?"

"Oh boy, where would I start?"

"The beginning?"

"Okay, Ma got a job in California so we drove from Newark to LA with the car packed with our stuff. I complained the whole way and..."

Daniel hadn't had a chance to retell the story in a while and it was kind of fun to have an audience holding onto every word because they didn't know the story. When he got to the beach he felt eyes on him and saw Johnny, hair damp, and with a familiar smirk, one he'd seen so many times, but it'd grown so much since before. There was fondness in his eyes, amused and so full of love.

"Don't let him make it seem like I was the only one getting hits in. He also sucker punched me," Johnny said pushing off the door frame and settling in on the other side to listen. "Daniel's tough."

They'd come so damn far. Daniel wanted to tell him that.

Johnny can you believe the first time we met we fought and now here we are? You're in my godfather's home, we're in Newark and you're spending the weekend for my Nonnio's birthday with the whole family and when we go home it's together, it's our home? Our bed? Our everything? But we started on that beach. Can you believe it? Would you ever have thought, in that moment if someone told you, that kid you're fighting is going to be your boyfriend, your lover, someone you love so much whose going to love you back so fiercely, would you have believed it? I don't know if I would've. I might've. If I'd stopped to take more of you in. I'd like to think maybe. I think maybe it's why I liked to egg you on when I could. Gravity. Pulled in towards you no matter what. Because I had fun doing it. I liked riling you up. I still do. Always will.

Sometimes I wonder if you love me as much as I love you. But that damn look. You love me so fucking much and it makes my knees weak. Like I'm some girl in one of those books Ma reads. I could totally be a girl on the cover of a harlequin novel pressed to your chest. Okay, now I do want that. Think we could do a weird photoshoot? Model for a harlequin book? Do they make harlequin books with just guys? What if we switched it?

"I can't believe you fought over a girl," the kid said nose scrunched up.

"A very cool girl," Johnny said.

"Would you fight someone over Daniel now?"

Johnny tilted his head thoughtfully and Daniel frowned.

That should've been easy.

He'd fight for Johnny in a heartbeat. Had. He was still fighting Chozen off. With his luck, he'd be doing that his whole life. He seemed stuck with the bastard.

Johnny, what the hell?

The answer was simple.

Yes.

Yes.

So easy.

Oh god, why wasn't he just saying yes?

"No."

"What?" Daniel squawked.

"Not like I did on the beach over Ali," Johnny said, not looking at Daniel, but at Christopher. "Ali didn't want me fighting over her. She wasn't interested anymore. I took that hard. And I hurt someone over it because I was upset and angry. I regret that. I regret a lot of things. Almost everything from the first six months I knew Daniel. I kept trying to pull Ali back to me and I hurt myself and I hurt her and Daniel. So no. Not like that. I'm done fighting for the love and attention of people who don't like me. It's all I ever did. I fought hard for Ali's attention, my stepfather's, and my sensei's. And none of it was worth it. You shouldn't ever have to fight to be loved. It took me a long time to realize it. Love shouldn't be given to you in scraps or crumbs."

Daniel looked away rubbing at his eyes, if he could go back and rescue that boy earlier, he'd bury him in an avalanche of love. He'd have done it in a heartbeat. He sniffed, blinking up at the ceiling.

"But," Johnny said and Daniel glanced at him, he was smiling. "I will fight **for** the people I love. For my friends, my family, for Daniel. If he's in danger. I'd fight. Always will."

"Would *you* fight people over Johnny?" the kid said turning to Daniel like the lesson full of his inner truth just went over his head.

Daniel laughed, it was a little watery.

Johnny reached over and brushed an errant tear from his cheek.

"Hell yeah," Daniel said. "And I'd win."

Johnny burst out laughing.

"You can never tell Mr. Miyagi," Daniel said deadly serous. "He'd be so disappointed."

"Who'd ever think **I'd** be the better Miyagi student?"

"You are *not* the better Miyagi-do student."

"Oh, but I clearly am. I learned and internalized his lessons. I'm *so* balanced."

"Balanced? You ate fried baloney at like 2 am Wednesday night."

"My 2am eating habits were not part of the equation."

"No, but I think it's something important to note. You are a great house guest. Very clean. Very quiet. Very helpful. But you were dying weren't you? Just to eat junk food late at night?"

"Listen there's nothing wrong with fried baloney."

"I know, it's cheap, but we can buy real food."

"It *is* food. What do you recommend I eat at 2 am?"

"A bigger dinner earlier? Why were you even up?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah."

I thought I wore you out. How the hell-

"Why couldn't you sleep?" Christopher asked.

Johnny looked away fiddling with the blankets.

Daniel waited.

"Got nervous about our trip. My mother said some stuff and it became maybe bigger than it is. Or maybe not. Maybe it is big. But you are all important to Daniel and there's a lot of you. I wanted...I wanted everyone to like me."

"I like you."

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry they've been awful and rude. I'd say they're normally not like this but I remembered that they are," Daniel sighed, reaching over and taking Johnny's hand. "Believe me I've chewed them out and I'm going to talk to Louie Jr. about-"

"It's okay."

"It's not okay."

"I mean Louie Jr., don't chew him out. He's going through a lot right now."

Daniel looked at Johnny in surprise.

I changed my mind, he's cool.

Daniel sighed. "He told them that-"

"After you guys left Louie Jr. snapped at everyone," Christopher said.

"What?" Daniel asked.

Christopher nodded. "It woke me up. He got loud. Told them to stop. Said they made it really hard to be around 'em sometimes. Said no wonder Johnny didn't go with them. Said he wished he hadn't. Said Johnny helps out and is nice and just because he...well he said a bad word...I don't know what it means. But I think he meant messed up? That he really wished they wouldn't judge people so fast."

Daniel laughed. "Did he now?"

"Yeah, said he liked Johnny and he agreed with Nonnia that he's family and then he said a *bunch* of bad words."

"What did you do?" Daniel asked with a laugh squeezing Johnny's hand. He couldn't believe Louie Jr. *liked* Johnny. He thought that'd be the last domino to fall not one of the first.

Johnny shrugged. "Not much, but it's getting late, we should try to sleep."

Johnny looked at Daniel blue eyes focused like what he was going to say was important.

"You going to be okay sleeping like this?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You're like a heat seeking octopus, I don't want you crushing Christopher. I can handle your like wrestlers grip, I'm use to it."

"Hey!" Daniel said. "It'll be fine."

Johnny looked at him like he didn't believe him.

He would not have a problem. He'd done this a thousand times. He

laid down arms crossed with a frown.

"Okay, you okay if I turn out the light?" Johnny asked.

"Yes," Christopher said.

Johnny nodded flicking off the light and settling in.

Daniel grabbed one of the extra pillows and hugged it to his chest. He'd be fine, but he'd miss being next to Johnny. He tried not to poke and prod at the feeling because he was trying to be good.

"Good night," Johnny said.

"Night," Daniel said.

He wondered what had gotten Louie Jr. to change his mind. Had it been when Johnny had helped a lost kid? Maybe. At some point though Louie Jr. had deflated. Had stopped getting all riled up about Johnny. Had it been Nonnia and Nonnio? Because if Ma was right they'd been fond of Johnny from the get go. And it wasn't because of Daniel loving him. Which was kind of disappointing. He'd stressed about it but he'd kind of liked the *Nonnia and Nonnio like my boyfriend more than he likes your fiancé*. Which it still was, it just wasn't because of romantic reasons, but because Johnny was good.

Johnny had said Louie Jr. was going through a lot right now. Sure Louie Sr. had been sick, but Ma came home, which meant he was better right? He'd never asked. What if he hadn't gotten better? Louie Sr. wasn't there. Was that what Johnny had meant? Shit. He should've asked. Should've checked in.

Louie Jr. was his closest cousin, one of his oldest friends...but he hadn't...he'd hang out with Louie in the morning. They'd go get bagels or something. Talk about it. He'd check in. Fuck. He'd overlooked it. Assumed everything was fine.

Daniel woke up still hugging the pillow to his chest and a tiny fist in his face. He pushed himself up with a feeling of triumph, wanting to tell Johnny that *ha he totally was fine sleeping without him next to him and see, he didn't hurt anyone with his intense sleep holds.* But Johnny was asleep still, curled up on his side taking up as little space as the six foot teen could. Curled up almost like he was cold.

Daniel carefully slid out of the bed and padded over to Johnny's side gently crouching down and cupping the side of his face.

Was it how he slept when Daniel wasn't there?

Or was it because he knew the kid was in the bed and didn't want to crush him?

Or was it something else leftover?

Blue eyes opened after a moment.

"That does not look comfortable," Daniel said softly.

"Morning," Johnny said reaching out and pulling him close.

Daniel huffed a breath of a laugh leaning in and kissing him gently.

If it was his families fault he was going to start cutting people off.

If Johnny was curling himself into a ball because of some stupid thing someone who knew nothing but had enough time to gossip and speculate had said he was going to start a fight.

Sorry Mr. Miyagi. He'd try to not let it become physical. But he was pretty sure after everything Johnny had been through, his whole life, Mr. Miyagi would look the other way or at least forgive Daniel.

"I see you didn't crush Christopher," Johnny said amused pushing himself up and glancing over.

"Of course not. I'm not *that* horrible to share a bed with."

"No no your not," Johnny said pushing blonde hair back and out of his eyes.

Daniel gave him one more kiss before going about his morning routine, returning to find Christopher bouncing up and down in the corner talking fast about some kids cartoon Daniel had never seen while Johnny pulled on the sweater Nonnia had knitted him asking questions and nodding, following along with Christophers errant thoughts with ease.

If Daniel wasn't careful not only would his home be full of their friends, librarians and old teachers, Abulea and her grandchildren, but also children that just followed Johnny home. Once that seemed like a nice dream, but with dwindling alone time it now felt like an

impending nightmare.

Johnny would be like some boy scout troop leader. Teaching them how to survive in the wild and tie knots and maybe Daniel could learn too and use it- nope, store that thought away for later.

Focus.

Family gathering. Baby cousins. Getting riled up would be horrible and there'd be no relief. Absolutely none. Not unless he could grab Johnny and run away, hide away somewhere, but there were too many people and it was Nonnio's birthday and Johnny would never forgive him if he dragged him into a closet or something and someone opened the door on them.

Johnny smiled looking at him, at his sweater, their matching sweaters.

Christopher held Johnny's hand, adamant about it like there was danger crossing the hallway. It wasn't like it was a highway at rush hour. But Daniel opened the door across the hall and remembered. He remembered why Christopher would've wanted to hold Johnny's hand. Because a morning at Nonnio and Nonnia's for a family event was chaos. People rushing this way and that, someone carrying out a hot pan of something from the kitchen to find someone else to look at and ask *Does this look right? I feel like it's missing something, what do you think?*

It was dangerous. The kid should've been wearing a pitcher's outfit with a helmet just to cross into the place.

Daniel couldn't decide whether matching sweaters was kind of dorky or not. But when Nonnia saw them and her entire demeanor changed like sunlight breaking through, her face brightened and her hands rose to Daniel's face.

"Look how handsome you both look. I knew those colors would compliment you both well."

She was so happy. That was the point. To make his Nonnia happy. She hugged them both. Big warm tight hugs.

"Oh hello Christopher. Your mother's been looking for you."

Christopher nodded letting go of Johnny's hand and darting off in search of his mom.

"You two must be hungry. We'll eat soon, come," she said before pulling them along to the living room. Out of the way of the chaos. Nonnio was in his chair watching a game on the TV and glancing up when they came in.

"Oh ho Tesero, you've outdone yourself this time, absolutely perfect as always."

"You flatterer," Nonnia said with a grin, leaning down and kissing the top of Nonnio's head. "Keep it up."

He laughed gently squeezing her hand. "You know, I could help with-"

"Nope, don't even think about it."

Nonnio looked at them. "I try, every year."

"And then you make a big deal out of my birthday," she said with a grin.

"I do," he said tapping his nose conspiratorial and giving them a wink. "And I keep it an even bigger secret than she does."

"Like I said, pay him no heed in his wounded routine. He's full of tricks. Now be good."

Nonnia smiled walking off and Johnny sat down on the couch, he had a couple books under his arms that he sat on the table.

"I'm going to go find Louie," Daniel said. He didn't want to leave Johnny's side, but he thought if he was with Nonnio then it'd be okay. Johnny nodded. Daniel turned slowly to look around for Louie.

He found Louie near the door.

"Hey Louie I'm going out for a bagel and some coffee, want to come?" Daniel asked grabbing his jacket.

"Is Johnny coming?" Louie asked.

"He can if you want, or doesn't have to if you don't want him to. I think he's reading."

"You okay with that? Aunt Lucille said you went through like withdrawals of not getting to hold his hand or something yesterday."

"I think I can survive breakfast," Daniel said.

Could he?

Yesterday was rough.

He'd gone to breakfast without Johnny before, spent time without him. But there was something that made his skin itch knowing that their time together was limited, that soon he'd be rushing home to see Johnny after all day without him. It made every second precious and something he coveted. He wanted to hoard it all. All he could do, once they got home, was lock the doors and try and persuade Johnny into taking a few more days off from the shop so they could just be a tangle of sweaty limbs.

But he owed Louie this.

He was the older cousin.

He'd watched his own dad die.

He had the experience navigating these waters and he hadn't checked in, he hadn't said *anything* to Louie.

He'd only thought of Johnny, only looked at the way his lips looked in the cold of Newark in January with his breath visible and his cheeks pink, bundled up in things Daniel had bought him.

Daniel sighed he wanted to kiss Johnny.

"All I need to do is get a kiss from him and then I'll be good to go," Daniel said, "So get your jacket and your gloves."

Louie looked at him with a frown, suspicious but getting ready and Daniel went back to find Johnny.

He was pretty sure he was with Nonnio still, reading curled up on the couch.

Yup, there he was.

Nonnio usually looked kind of sad on his birthday, his family all around but not with him. Even though Johnny was reading, Nonnio seemed more relaxed, like it was nice to watch basketball on TV and just have Johnny there reading a book.

Daniel got that. He liked that too. Just knowing Johnny was there helped him sleep at night. There'd been no way he would've gotten a good nights sleep for months if he hadn't physically felt Johnny next

to him.

He kissed Nonnio on top of the head.

"You want me to sneak you back a bagel and some coffee?" Daniel asked.

"Oh yes please," Nonnio said, patting his arm. "It'll do Louie Jr. some good to get out."

Daniel smiled, Nonnio always seemed to know.

He nodded and walked over to Johnny, gently putting his hand on top of his book and tugging it down, watching Johnny's eyes follow the page as it went down, following whatever sentence he was on to its end before his eyes shot back up to him.

"I'm taking Louie out for breakfast, I'll be back after. You going to be okay?"

"Yes."

"Anyone gives you trouble, you'll tell me right? Rat them out to me."

"I'm going to stick with Nonnio," Johnny said. "And I think Christopher and the other kids were supposed to come back with all this art they made to show us. They also wanted me to help."

"Okay," Daniel said, leaning forward kissing him.

He wanted to stay.

He wanted to just keep kissing Johnny, thinking about the way he'd made his lips into a little o to breathe out cold air when they went shopping, like it was novel and new, even though he'd been somewhere cold before, even though he went to the mountains with the guys. How cute it was, and how pink and warm and wet his mouth was- and shit, he had to go or else things would get bad and his Nonnio was right there.

Daniel pulled away kissing the top of his head and hurrying out the door past Louie Jr. who was struggling, hopping around trying to get his foot into his boot.

"The usual place?" Daniel asked shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Yeah. They're still good," Louie Jr. said walking beside him.

Daniel worried at his lower lip.

What did he say?

Where did he start?

What comfort did he have to give?

That having a sick parent was rough but it gave you a chance, on good days to try and talk, to talk about things you didn't think would happen for a long time, until you had a better handle on your life. To face the tough things. It gave you time to come to terms that they might not be there for those big things. It still sucked. It was still awful. But-

"Why didn't you ever tell me that karate got you babes?"

What? What babes?

Louie had his hands in his pockets, shoulders tense and up near his ears, trying to keep his collar up against the wind because he hadn't brought his scarf.

"Huh?"

"I told the girls that I have a cousin in LA who does karate and won a tournament and then I thought, well Daniel's doing it, so I started taking classes too you know? I'm not any good but like girls like it. Think I'm cool."

"Wait, are you saying you're using *me* to get girls?"

"Well it's not like you'd want them right?"

"That's not the point."

"I mean you're like regularly getting laid, right? So what do you care?"

"Girls, how many girls are you dating?"

"Five."

"Do they know that you're dating other girls?"

"No, but like your friend- Bobby right? He-"

"Louie you *can't* do that. They have to know and be okay with it.

Bobby always tells everyone. Heck he apparently only ended up with his situation because the girls all agreed day one. No one thought it was exclusive."

"Really?" Louie asked looking at him wide-eyed.

"Yes, really. You can't just-" Daniel heaved a sigh, feeling cold fill his lungs.

He missed LA and it's warmth.

"Damn it," Louie said kicking his feet. "They're going to be pissed."

"Listen I know things are-"

"**No**," Louie said.

"What?"

"I know what this is, and I get it, and thanks, but I don't- I don't want to talk about it right now. I'll work my way there, but right now I want to just sit and talk. Give me time to get there, but like not yet okay?"

Daniel looked at him surprised and nodded.

Louie kicked at some of the snow piled up on the side of the sidewalk. "How'd you know you liked Johnny?"

"You like one of the girls you're seeing?" Daniel asked pushing the door to the bagel shop open, hit by a wall of warmth that was so welcoming and the smell of bagels, coffee, and pastries.

"I think, it's fun, it's just, it's not- it's not deep," Louie said. "The sex is good though."

"What?" Daniel squawked turning to Louie, but Louie was walking past him towards the counter picking out his bagel, getting lox on it and cream cheese and egg and ordering a coffee, black.

He was trying to seem older than he was. Standing tall and puffing out his chest, as if he needed any more height. But it was a ruse.

He did that sometimes, tried to order his coffee black, plain and then would suffer through it. Until he saw Daniel dump in a bunch of cream. Then that seemed to mean he didn't have to suffer. Could add sugar and cream, relax.

Daniel pinched the bridge of his nose.

He should've checked in with Louie sooner.

He had a habit of making dumb choices and not realizing how bad they were.

He didn't use all of his brain.

"Everything bagel, with cream cheese, lox, capers, tomato and red onion please. And I'll take a cappuccino. Thanks and I've got his," Daniel said digging out his wallet.

"Thanks cuz," Louie said looking at the pastries.

"Can I get some little creamer cups and sugar packets?" Daniel asked.

The worker nodded and Daniel got his change and headed over to a table by the window, slowly taking off all of his winter gear.

"You know you're going to get in trouble, like what you're doing is what Charlotte's ex did."

Louie looked at him startled, hand going to protect himself between his legs. "What?" he hissed.

"Wait what do you think happened to Charlotte's ex?" Daniel asked.

"Uh, didn't they chop off his– *you know*, and then throw it into the river for the fish?"

"No! Oh god no. Who told you that?"

"I just overheard…" Louie said relaxing a little.

"No, damn. I mean they might've talked about it, but they didn't, no he just got iced out and due to karma his car went swimming with some fish."

"Oh," Louie said hearing their number called and hopping up to get the tray and bringing it over.

"Okay, but…I mean I didn't *think* it was cheating."

"Yeah Louie, that's exactly what cheating is."

"Oh," Louie said. "What if I just break up with all of them?"

“I mean you probably should, tell them you messed up and…did you use protection?”

Daniel now was worried that on top of everything else there’d soon be some poor girl forced to make a decision, or multiple girls.

“Of course I did. I got the same talk you did.”

Daniel blinked at his coffee and then looked at Louie. “What?”

Louie shrugged. “Moshe and Tristen gave all the guys the same talk after they gave you the talk. Hey, is the sex good? Is that why you- I mean is Johnny good?”

Daniel felt his skin burn.

“We are not going to talk about this.”

“Who are you going to talk to it about?” Louie asked raising an eyebrow, snatching up the sugar off the tray and dumping it into his coffee. “Because last time I checked I’m your oldest best friend.”

“We’re family. I’m not talking to you about my sex life.”

“You were going to,” Louie said. “You promised you would when we were younger, that we’d talk to each other about everything.”

“Yeah, but that was for like flings.”

“It’s not my fault you went from kissing one girl at summer camp to getting boned by a blonde in California that you liked enough to bring home. Just because you thought you’d be a casanova and ended up not being one shouldn’t change things,” Louie said frowning, looking at the pile of packets and his coffee then at Daniel’s coffee, then grabbing more packets of sugar. “The sex I’m having is good, but also I feel dirty after. I always shower a lot. My skin’s drying out.”

“Why is this the conversation--Louie-”

“I mean Johnny is hot but I don’t know...is it the karate thing? Or the muscles? I mean you had a type, you always wanted to watch the fights on TV. The ones with all the shirtless guys. I kind of figured. And you never had a crush on any of the girls at school. So like is it good? Or like-”

Daniel had a headache.

He'd started his day off so good, and had thought this was something long over due.

He didn't realize it'd be his cousin trying to get *this* information.

"Louie-"

"I mean okay, so you've got no one to talk to right? Like you've got friends but they're both your friends or they're also Johnny's ex, or other girls who are also his friend, or his friends, or whatever, your only other options are Aunt Lucille or the old man?"

He was right. He didn't like that he was right.

"Ali is my ex too."

"I mean I'm not asking for details."

"Aren't you though?"

"I just want to know if it's good? Because I keep thinking about what Tristen and Moshe said and like they made it sound like it was good. So like, is it?"

"I *could* talk to Tristen and Moshe," Daniel realized.

"No. You promised me."

"Yeah, again, for flings and like regular stuff. Not about the guy I'm invested in."

"Invested in. Who says that? Is this business school talking? Who are you?"

"No, I just mean-"

"Is it bad? Like is that why you're avoiding the question? Is Johnny bad at sex?"

Daniel rubbed his face and groaned.

"He's got a policy to not talk about stuff with other people and it feels weird knowing he's not going to but you're going to make me-"

"I'm not going to like go around and tell everyone," Louie said with a defensive huff.

“Fine, fine, it’s very good okay?”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously. Oh my god. This is the worst conversation I’ve ever had with you and we've had awful conversations, like your what would be worse game."

“Hey.”

“No seriously, this is not a conversation for breakfast. This is…this is like a drunken late night conversation.”

“We’re both under 21 Daniel.”

“You drank wine with me. Don’t act all high and mighty now.”

“Yeah because you thought Great Aunt Elda was right.”

“Well I thought she was. I didn’t realize that you just vomit red wine back up exactly the same. I thought we were dying because it was red.”

“Don’t remind me. I don’t think I’ll drink wine again for a long time. Except like sometimes maybe. But wait, why are you getting all evasive? Are *you* on top?” Louie asked in a suspicious tone.

“Can we move past this please?”

“Oh, I got it right? Holy shit, that opens up a different idea. He is pretty, and I mean-” Louie said leaning back thoughtfully.

“Stop it. No. Don’t you dare, do you know how many people I’m constantly fighting off?”

“He’s popular huh? Is it the karate? It’s *definitely* the karate. Or is it the like cliché blue eyed blonde California boy look he has? Is it the muscle? Oh, shit, is it because he let’s you be on top? I mean you know, maybe if- I mean he’s nice, he’s kind and helpful and huh.”

“Don’t huh. Stop thinking about it. Why did I talk about it? No. I didn't talk about it, you've just got your mind in th gutter. Erase that from your brain. Do not think about Johnny like that. He’s my boyfriend and I know you’re my cousin but I will hurt you,” Daniel said picking up his butter knife and pointing it at Louie.

Louie laughed. “I’m not going to *do* anything. I’m just thinking.

There's no crime in thinking, what are you the thought police from "1984"?"

"You read that?" Daniel asked trading his butter knife for his bagel in the hopes of moving onto a safer topic and being able to eat in peace.

"Had to for school. And reading…well reading that book was like a good excuse to not be home…no, not talking about that yet. So wait, you and Johnny, I would've thought he'd be on top, has he ever...You are so easy to read. Why not? Are you scared?" Louie asked leaning forward and whispering.

"I'm not scared."

"You're getting some twisted revenge aren't you?"

"What?"

"Like the guy beats you up for what, six months? Less right because of the truce? So you get your revenge by boning him every chance you get. Showing that you win in some like old school manliness contest. Moshe and Tristen would be disappointed in you. I bet you're trying to bone him every place that he hurt you."

"I am not!"

"Is that why you won't let him bone you? Or is it like a type thing? Like… Moshe and Tristen said that sometimes there's specific preferences…is that it?"

"No," Daniel said feeling his face burning. This was not how he expected his morning to go. He mixed a packet of sugar into his cappuccino and took another bite of his bagel and lox.

"No to what part?"

"Listen," Daniel said around a mouthful of his bagel. "It's not that. We've just, both been through a lot and things have changed and now…now I don't know."

"You don't know?" Louie asked eyebrow raised.

"When you have all these people treating you like shit, it's hard to relax. And I, I want to, I really do, but I don't know if I can right now."

"Well you better not right now, you know it's Nonnio's birthday."

“What do you think it all entails? It can be quick.”

“It’s just rude. Who knew you were such a horny monster?"

“You asked!”

“Yeah, You know that they have like AA for that stuff right?”

“What horny anonymous? I hate you.”

“You’re the one who made the promise. To talk about anything and everything.”

“Louie, come on-”

“Is it like with a girl?”

“I don’t know.”

“What?”

“You’d have to ask Johnny.”

“Wait,” Louie said leaning forward, eyes wide. “You and that chick never?”

“No!”

“Was she-wait is it because- oh, that makes sense.”

Daniel rubbed his face. ”Listen-”

“No. You really like Johnny that much. What about him does it for you?”

“Louie! You said we wouldn’t go into details.”

“So I just want to know what about that is so good that you’re satisfied. Because like five girls, I didn't really want to bring any of them home."

"Louie, you can't string these girls along."

"Yeah I got that, but you got a home run. How?"

"Johnny was really sweet, I just, we just got off on the wrong foot and I don't fully blame him for all of it-"

"You mean those guys, Kreese and Sid?"

"Yeah. I mean it was like all a wall right? To protect himself and I think, I think I kept trying to get under that wall and he kept trying to stop me and I didn't realize I was like wanting in there because I thought he was hot. I just thought I was doing what I always do. That I kept dreaming of a blonde, not realizing it wasn't my girlfriend. Not realizing I was having vague dreams about Johnny but I was also, like he hurt me so I didn't really feel comfortable exploring that until after he apologized and after I saw just how sincere he was and nice and kind and..."

"This is mushy gushy romantic stuff it's not actually sex related. I don't care about the relationship bit. Is it his ass? I haven't looked."

"Louie, if you do I will stab you," Daniel said waving the butter knife at him.

Louie laughed, a warm deep laugh. "I missed this."

"What?"

"You."

"Me? But I've been-"

"You are quick to like piss off and you fight and are feisty and you've been quiet and just like sticking to Johnny's side when you can and I was worried. You know, after everything with Silver."

"You know about Silver?"

"The whole family knows about Silver. I kept calling to check in and you wouldn't answer or call me back. I got worried about you."

Daniel set his knife down. He hadn't talked to family in awhile. Hadn't check-in, hadn't had the time or the energy. He'd taken Louie out for breakfast planning to check in on him, not the other way around. But it was clear, now, with the way Louie's head was bent sipping at his mostly sugar coffee that he'd been checking-in on Daniel, worried. Additional worry that Louie didn't need on his plate.

"I think that's why everyone was super critical of Johnny. Because like he'd also hurt you, but they don't know that Johnny's a good guy. Not just a pretty face," Louie said softly.

"He isn't just a pretty face," Daniel agreed.

"He apparently also likes your dick," Louie said with a teasing grin.

"Louie, I will get up and leave I swear."

Louie laughed, shoving the rest of his bagel and lox in his mouth.

"You gonna marry him?" he asked, mouth full.

Daniel blinked looking at Louie. "You know I can't. You know if we could marry that Moshe and Tristen already would be-"

"Oh. Right. But if you could?"

"In a heartbeat."

"Even though you've only been dating like a year?"

"Mom and Dad dated like three months."

"My mom says that was lucky."

Daniel nodded looking down at his cappuccino thoughtfully.

"You should still do something at some point."

"Like what?"

"A nice private ceremony. A party. Just like a promise or something."

"I think we have to wait."

"Why?"

"I want to prove I can take care of him."

"To who?"

"His mom."

"Does she care? Wait is that a whole thing? You're like trapped in like a guy/girl relationship even though neither of you are a girl?"

Daniel blinked. "No, I just- his mom can be scary. I like her, she's cool but I want her to like, be okay giving me Johnny."

"Giving you Johnny, what is he some girl you're trading like five cows

for in the old days?"

"No, that's not what I meant."

"It sounds like you're sticking yourself into a box."

"I-it's complicated."

"It sounds like you're a mess."

"I- well...yeah."

Louie nodded sagely.

"I am too."

Daniel bit back what he was going to say. That admission meant maybe, maybe Louie would talk. Maybe he was ready. He'd checked in on Daniel and now it was his turn. Daniel took a sip of his cappuccino and waited.

"He can't talk much. I just don't want to talk about it. I don't want to be comforted because it makes me feel guilty. And I don't want anyone's pity because *I'm* fine. I'm not fine though, but I am? I'm upset but I'm also not because he's still here. And I'm adjusting. I want to be home but I also never want to be home. I want to be anywhere but. And I want to spend time with him but it's hard. Because he's not him. He is. But he's different. He's crabbier. He's meaner. He yelled at Aunt Lucille a lot, or at least kind of did. He's impatient. I don't like it or feel comfortable. I feel like I'm supposed to be by his side all the time. Like it's my duty to be by his side all the time and it's hard and I can't. I can't handle it. I don't want to face it. I don't like it. I don't like how slow it is. I don't like just watching him become a different person. A shell of who he was, angry. I miss him. But he's still here and people don't get that. I mean I still love him but it kind of feels like he's already gone. Like the man he was, Dad, he's kind of already gone, and now there's just this sick guy at home that sometimes is like a shadow of who he was, but he's not him. He's like that bug, the one that comes up and screams all summer and then you go out and all you find is the shell stuck to the tree. I miss my dad. But like no one gets that. Because he's still here. I feel guilty for everything. For any joy or happeniness, or laughing. When I'm home I'm miserable when I'm not home I feel guilty.

"I... I don't want advice, I don't want pity, I just want to-I want you to listen. To just be here and I want to live in a world for even for a

moment where things are different. Where people aren't whispering their pity and their concern. And I...I also *don't* want to be here. I want to be doing something else. I want to be anywhere else. I don't want to be in Newark. I don't want to be in Jersey. I think I think it's why I fucked up with the girls. I just, I want to feel something else. I feel like I'm stuck in the mud. Like I'm sinking and I could get out I just don't know how. I feel like I'm not living my life but I'm scared to live my life. That if I turn around, if I move then something bad will happen and everyone will say why weren't you home? Why weren't you there? Daniel was there. Daniel was home when *his* dad died. Daniel held his hand and it was super sweet. And I...I don't want to be there. I don't want to watch him die. I mean he might not. But he also might. I'm not as good of a son as you were. And they talk about it, all the time. Daniel was such a good boy when his dad died. He was always home. He was always by his side. He cried. Why haven't you cried? You don't look miserable enough. But I am. This is...this is just my face."

Daniel reached out. "Louie. I felt like an awful son. For not spending time with him *before*. And you're not me, you're allowed to be you."

Louie nodded, sniffing drinking his coffee.

"You want one of those fancy pastries?" Daniel asked.

Louie nodded.

Daniel got up and ordered a few, returning back and sitting down next to Louie.

"I was a kid. You're a teen. We also are different people. It's unfair to compare us."

Louie nodded, swallowing hard playing with the ripped up tiny mountain of sugar packets.

"How did Johnny handle it?"

"Handle what?"

"Someone trying to kill him?"

Daniel blinked and sat back.

"I think if I'd know he'd been in so much pain. That people were- I would've been nicer to him when he arrived. That first time. He's really nice," Louie whispered.

Daniel nodded patting Louie's shoulder. "Yeah I think I would've been too."

"You weren't nice to him?"

Daniel laughed. "I liked egging him on. It was fun to wind him up and watch him go. Because no one else ever had behaved like that around me. It was...brutually honest. How he felt. When he was mad, it was like lava, rushing towards me and I knew I needed to get out of the way, that I needed to stop, but there was something about it. How intensely he felt everything. I liked it. It was thrilling. Like I assume how people feel when they jump out of planes."

"You're fucked up."

Daniel smiled ruffling Louie's hair.

"Hey! I worked hard on that."

"I'm making it up to him. Slowly."

"How?"

"I-"

"You can't just say by making him orgasm. Orgasms don't fix everything. That's what I've been trying. It doesn't work."

"Of course not. You got to work on the stuff in here," Daniel said tapping his own chest and then his head. "I mean I'm not perfect but I like that he's comfortable around me."

"Comfortable like he doesn't wear clothes?"

"That's not what I meant but-"

"Is your apartment just a nudists' home?" Louie asked wrinkling his nose and drinking his coffee.

"No, can't be. Our friends have keys, they're over all the time."

"You *want* it to be," Louie said with exaggerated shock.

"Fine, yes. I'm dating a fucking greek marble statue and I like looking okay? He's hot. I admit it. He's very hot. He's also very smart and he can fix things, and he sees things differently so when I'm struggling with something he finds a different solution. And now when we wind

each other up it's *fun*. And it's a million times better then it was. Because it's all playful and loving and now when I wind him up he just plays right back and it's kind of sexy. And he listens to everything I say and he remembers and I don't know how he does, how he follows along, but he does and I'm happy and yes, the sex is good. It's so good. And if I could lock our friends out all I would do is have sex with him and talk to him and make him food and listen to him. I want to spend time with him because he's my favorite person."

"Gross, it's all intertwined huh?" Louie asked before laughing. "Like you want to be."

"What are you even talking about?"

"You're like so in love with him that it hikes up your desire to bone him which hikes up your love and it just like keeps going. How do you survive that?"

Daniel frowned looking away.

"Cuz are you miserable?"

"No! I'm very happy. I just, am like always..."

"You do do it a lot right?"

"We do, but I want to do it more."

"Gross."

"You're the one asking, why do you keep saying gross?"

"Because I don't know what else to say!" Louie said laughing and rubbing his eyes. "Like if I say cool hot, or something like that you'll think I'm hitting on Johnny and get pissed and threaten me with the butter knife again."

"I-"

He was right. There was no way to keep talking about it.

"Why do you call him Johnny and not John?"

Daniel blinked surprised. "Oh, uh..." He held his mug in both hands. "His teacher, Kreese, his first name is John."

"The guy who tried to kill him?"

"Yeah. I don't want to remind him of that. I don't want to do anything to send him back to that time. So I call him by the name he goes by. I mean everyone calls him Johnny."

"What about like a pet name?"

"You mean like honey or dear?"

"Yeah."

Daniel shrugged. "We spent, or I guess he spent so much time calling me by my last name that I just am enjoying being on a first name basis. I haven't, I don't know if he'd like that."

"You should try it."

Daniel nodded looking at the pastries and picking one with blueberries to eat. "Will you *finally* let me change topics?"

"Yes."

"Then what do you want to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Outside of school. You started doing karate. What are you interested in?"

"I don't know. I kind of like karate, but everyone just says I'm copying you."

"Well I mean you kind of are, and you're using my win to get laid."

"You make it sound bad," Louie said picking up one of the pastries and eating it getting little bits of flaky pastry everywhere.

"It kind of is Louie. But it doesn't have to stay that way. You can study karate and find your own style."

"There's different styles?"

"Yeah I mean Cobra Kai," Daniel shuddered the word tasting like sand on his tongue. "Is different from Mr. Miyagi's karate."

"And karate is big in LA?"

"Yeah, like baseball in here."

"That's *big*."

"Yeah or like football."

"Damn."

Louie talked a little about school, about home, asked him more questions about LA and thankfully stopped prying into Daniel's sex life. A relief, even though Daniel felt bad, gross, for everything he had said. Even though he felt like hadn't said much he still felt like he owed Johnny an apology.

Before they left he got a coffee for Johnny and one for Nonnio and then a bagel for Nonnio. He was sure Nonnia had fed Johnny. He knew that even if she was busy cooking or party prepping that she wouldn't let a guest be in the house longer than five minutes without food.

When they got home Louie looked better, pulling away and saying hi to Nonnio and giving him his bagel before plopping down next to Johnny, not saying anything but just sitting next to him. Johnny was reading. It looked like he was close to done with that book. But he was ready with several more waiting nearby. Ready to just sit and read all day if no one interfered or interrupted.

"Mind if I trade you Nonnio?"

"Huh?" Nonnio asked looking up from the coffee he took from Daniel.

"I promised Johnny I'd take him to the library."

"Boring," Louie said.

Daniel laughed. "Yeah that's the trade. You hang out with Nonnio I take Johnny to the library. Can you do that?"

"Easy, whose winning Nonnio?"

Daniel smiled, waiting for Johnny to finish the sentence or paragraph he was on, watching as he put the bookmark in his book, speaking softly to Nonnio and Louie who were too engrossed in the game to say more beyond a *yeah,* and *thanks* and then he was up and Daniel's heart thudded hard in his chest. The light was perfect, his hair was getting long, he was so pretty. It made him light headed.

Talking about him had made Daniel miss him, like he'd been

homesick.

Homesick for a person.

He'd felt that before. Missing his dad, the days where his dad was still alive but not home, in the hospital and how quiet it was at dinner, how neither his mother or him talked about it, the way she tried to smile but it didn't really fully reach her eyes, how it wasn't as big as he remembered. She talked a lot but it was just noise. The way he'd missed his mom while she was in Jersey, while he'd been in Okinawa when he came home and she was gone. But this was different. Like a craving mixed with an ache.

He held out his hand and Johnny smiled at him taking it. He passed him the coffee. He'd ordered it the way Johnny liked.

He wondered if they could stop by Tristen and Moshe's first, lock the bedroom door for a while. He wanted to kiss Johnny till the both were breathless, wanted to touch his hair and marvel at how it looked in the afternoon light.

He had to let go of Johnny's hand while he put on his jacket, his scarf, slowly going through the motions, gloves, hat. Sweetly bundled, wrapped in things Daniel got him and Daniel wondered why he liked that so much. Because while he wasn't with Johnny it felt like part of him was? That didn't seem to be all of it. There was something else he was sure, but he didn't want to dwell. He wanted to just enjoy.

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

He'd forgotten, like always, how cold it was when they pushed the door open and headed down the steps. It was like walking into a solid wall of cold.

Johnny shivered next to him. His nose was already turning pink.

"Did you have a good breakfast with Louie?"

"Yeah," Daniel said. "Though I'm sorry."

"Sorry? For what?"

"We talked about you."

"Oh."

"Nothing bad. Just maybe...awkward."

"Awkward?"

"He wanted to know if..."

He couldn't do it. But he felt like he had to.

He blushed darkly unable to meet Johnny's gaze.

"We um, we talked about, you see, he had this compelling point right? How when I was little I promised I'd always tell him everything. And then like all our friends in California are *our* friends so I can't talk to them about- I mean not everyone talks about it- I mean *you* don't. But I...I'm a monster. I can't believe I let him talk me into- no it's not a good excuse. I wanted to talk to someone. But oh my god I'm so sorry."

"What are you talking about?" Johnny said.

Daniel stopped and turned to Johnny, taking a deep breath.

"We talked about sex," he could look at him and squeezed his eyes shut.

Johnny was quiet. Too quiet.

"I guess if his Dad is sick...but I'd have thought school would mention something before now, he's in high school."

Daniel peeked one eye open.

Johnny hadn't connected the dots. Thought Daniel had gone to breakfast to give Louie *the* talk.

"He-uh- wanted to know-"

"No one had the talk with him?"

"I mean, yeah he got that, the same one I did, but like-"

"So what did you tell him?"

"He wanted to know if it was good."

Johnny nodded like that made sense and Daniel couldn't do it. Couldn't tell him that Louie knew him too well, had guessed parts of

his sex life that he didn't, or hadn't talked about to anyone.

"How much detail did you give him?"

"Not too much," Daniel whispered. "He guessed a lot."

He needed to change the topic. He couldn't go through with it. He doubted people told their partners that they talked about their sex life with other people. He couldn't tell Johnny. He cleared his throat. "Apparently, he's using my name to get laid."

Johnny burst out laughing.

"What? How's that funny? I'm a champion and the people at the All Valley remember me. I'm thinking I might join their little judge council. My crane kick is famous."

"Don't tell Mr. Miyagi that you'll get the disappointed sad face," Johnny said after his fit of laughter subsided "Okay okay, fine how does someone use your name to get laid?"

"Apparently girls think it's cool that he's studying karate like his cousin who won first place in it in California."

"So why'd he ask you about sex then? If he's having it?"

"I think he was curious, but what? You don't think that'd get him laid? Using my name?"

"I think that's the weirdest way to-"

"Be careful," Daniel warned, less bite in it, but still standing tall and stiff.

"I think I just have an unfair way of- here I'll show you," Johnny hooked his arm around Daniel's waist, pulling him close, almost off his feet and Daniel yelped in surprise, hands on Johnny's arms, his coat. Johnny had pushed his scarf down.

"Daniel," he whispered, voice breathy and warm in his ear.

Daniel shivered, he'd felt the word, his own name roll over him, straight to his toes.

Johnny set him back down carefully and stepped back and Daniel blinked, surprised he'd shut his eyes and looked at Johnny who looked smug.

"What the hell was that?"

"The best way to use your name to get laid," Johnny said with a grin.

"What?" Daniel said, his knees felt weak. He wanted to find somewhere to grab Johnny and hear him say his name like that again. Wanted to hear it with a little hitch in his breath, in his voice. He felt light headed.

Johnny was smiling, walking backwards, away from him. Like he'd just won something.

Louie was right. Whatever Daniel had, he had it bad. He was in over his head. Johnny just didn't know how wrapped around his finger he had him. Just saying his name like that.

"Come back here, you can't just do that and then walk away," Daniel said making his legs move, forcing them to run across after Johnny who ducked out of his reach, that frustrating way he always did when he wanted. Where Daniel thought for sure he'd get his hands on him and then with ease and grace Johnny wasn't there, his finger tips would brush his jacket but that was as much as he'd get.

Then Johnny stopped at the corner, he couldn't go anywhere, didn't know where they were going and Daniel grabbed his scarf pulling him into a kiss, a warm heated kiss, the kind he'd been itching to have all morning, all afternoon.

Two could play that game.

Johnny's eyes were shut when Daniel pulled away, satisfied, hooking his arm through Johnny's pulling him along to the library, he stopped in front of the library and held out an arm. "Here it is, closest library."

"Your childhood library?" Johnny asked blush fading, dazed look disappearing.

It sounded like maybe that nerd of his was suddenly much more interested in the building then his usual level of interest.

Daniel nodded. "Yup. Got books for school here sometimes when I had projects but really did not go to the library as much as you did."

Johnny nodded studying the outside of it. Then he took Daniel's hand again before heading up the steps.

Was he judging his local library?

Not everyone hoarded libraries like a treasure. But then they pushed through the doors and Johnny looked around taking in the tall ceilings and the dark wood.

The smell threw Daniel back to when he'd been younger. Back to coming in after school because he had to check out a book for a last-minute project he needed to research for, or the time he'd come with both his parents to get a library card.

Johnny squeezed his hand and then picked a direction and headed off in it.

Daniel followed along, taking in things that had changed and things that hadn't. They made their way to through the non-fiction section and Johnny stopped and Daniel looked at the shelves.

Karate.

He was comparing the karate sections.

Daniel let go of his hand and with an idea slipped his hand Johnny's back pocket and squeezed. He jumped, ever so slightly and then turned to look at Daniel.

"Library on the table?"

To be fair, Daniel did not think they could keep as quiet as they should in a library. But he'd heard from the Bobby that there was a section at their school library were people had sex or made out, speaking with the surety of someone who knew the space well.

Johnny liked libraries, maybe they could think of something sneaky. Or maybe it'd be a pleasant torture.

Daniel wasn't sure.

"Not in the stacks," Johnny said ears red as he grabbed a book from the shelf.

He was distracting himself, trying to not focus on Daniel.

Unfair.

But that *wasn't* a no. But where in a library could you try to have sex other than the stacks?

He looked around.

He guessed that the stacks weren't really good cover.

Sure no one was there right then, but that didn't mean that they wouldn't later. And really Bobby would only know about that spot if he'd seen other people, unless there was just an underground orgy hosted in a specific spot of the library...it was Bobby, who knew.

Johnny was focusing on the book in his hands and Daniel moved in close, it was soft but he was doing meditation breaths.

Library was on the table. Library was very much on the table. He'd just have to plan.

"Do you just want to look at karate books all day? Or see the rest of the library?" Daniel asked.

He himself was on karate hiatus. He needed a break. No more tournaments. No more fights. He wanted to focus on other things, only spar with Johnny and the guys, practice kata with Mr. Miyagi sometimes. He wanted to let karate fall to a sometimes hobby.

He was more excited to be playing soccer when he got back. Their first practice was coming up.

Johnny nodded putting the book back. "Where's the kids section?" he asked.

Daniel frowned, but pulled his hand out of Johnny's back pocket and sighed leading the way. It was sweet. But he couldn't flirt in the kids section.

They made their way down to a basement to a large room with a lower ceiling and tiny bookcases. There was a small stage and colorful art on the walls. In the back, there were taller shelves and Johnny beelined over there.

"Hello, can I help you?"

The woman looked at the two of them with a barely disguised frown.

"I'm trying to decide whether or not I want to get a library card here," Johnny said perusing the shelf, not looking at her.

"Oh!" she said then walking away, heading to her desk, going through the drawers, and returning with a flyer for adult learning classes.

"Oh, no," Daniel said shaking his head. "He reads awfully big books all the time. Boring books. He's a nerd, I know he doesn't look like it, so I see how you got there. He's thinking of babysitting my baby cousins and is judging your bedtime story options."

"I'm not judging-" Johnny said looking away for the first time from the books to look at Daniel. "Did you call me a nerd?"

Daniel laughed softly.

She frowned. "We have a great collection of books."

"I didn't say you didn't..." Johnny said looking between the two of them. "I'm sorry I didn't mean to insuiate, I just was going to make a donation and I was trying to decide which section to make the donation towards. The nonfiction section is good, so I thought I'd check the kid's section next."

"A donation?" she asked.

"You nerd," Daniel said with a fond smile.

"Why do you keep calling me a nerd? I am not a nerd."

"You *are* a nerd."

"Again, I apologize. We live in LA, his family is here, we're probably going to visit once? Maybe more a year, and I already brought ten books from LA to here for this weekend and I thought if I paid for a library card for here then next time I wouldn't have to bring too many books with me. Instead I could just swing by, check out books for myself and then books to read to the kids and then return them and head home. They're enjoying the book I'm reading them now, but that's lucky. I'm not always carrying a good book for any age, let alone one that's story time worthy. There's like over ten kids and it worked well last night so I thought I'd prepare for next time."

Next time.

Daniel's insides turned to warm goo.

If they weren't in the kids section, if they wasn't a lady standing right there judging them Daniel would do his absolute hardest to pin Johnny against a stack and kiss him until he was breathless.

Instead he just squeezed his hand.

It was a poor consolation prize for what he wanted but it was better than nothing.

"We don't usually give out library cards to people who *don't* live in the area,"

"Right, that's why I'd *buy* one," Johnny said. "Is there someone I could talk to about that?"

She looked thoughtful then nodded. "Follow me."

They followed her to the kid's circulation desk and she picked up the phone.

"You *were* judging," Daniel whispered.

"Was it like this when you were little? Which book was your favorite?" Johnny asked, ignoring his point.

He was right.

Johnny *was* judging his childhood library. Snobby nerd. Of all the things to judge it was the library? Not the local cafes or restaurants?

Daniel judged the food of LA hard, and the public transit. Johnny was focusing on libraries. Though if he remembered correctly last time it was also the YMCA karate classes they watched. Johnny had said Mr. Miyagi was better. But that at was a given.

"My parents read the frog and the toad books to me. I liked those. It hasn't really changed," Daniel said looking around, rubbing his thumb over Johnny's knuckles.

It was kind of weird being back. He hadn't been down there since he'd been a kid. He remembered going with Louie Jr. to story time and sitting on that rug and how scratchy it was.

He remembered puppet shows and snacks.

He remembered his dad kneeling down with him holding out books and asking him, "How about this one?" His dad always had such a better eye for books Daniel would like.

Johnny gently bumped into his shoulder and Daniel looked at him.

He wondered if Johnny had done the same thing. At his libraries in LA had his mother dropped him off, knowing it was a safe location while

she was busy? Like his parents had done? Had Laura wandered around with him picking out books?

"How about you? Did you go to the library a lot as a kid?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah. I got the calendar for events and would go a lot, especially if there were snacks. Mom also would check out books to read at night. She read the Hobbit to me and the Lord of the Rings books."

Daniel knew those were nerdy. Louie Jr. had read them and talked about them for hours. Elves and shit. No wonder Johnny was such a nerd. Those also weren't short books either.

"And *The Princess Bride."*

Daniel did not know that one.

"That one is one of her favorites. She read it so much that I think I memorized it. At least for awhile. It's been awhile since I reread it."

Pretty nerd mom with a pretty nerd son.

"Okay, so do either of you know where the main circulation desk is? Near the media section?" the woman said hanging up the phone.

"I do," Daniel said.

"Okay, the head of the library will meet you there."

"Thank you," Johnny said.

Daniel turned on his heels letting go of Johnny's hand, heading back up the stairs.

He paused looking back at Johnny and grinned when Johnny realized he'd stopped and dragged his gaze back up to see that Daniel had caught him. He turned bright red and looked away. Daniel laughed, too loud for the library, but managed to get it to quiet pleased giggles.

"Don't," Johnny whispered when they reached the main floor. "please don't."

"Don't what? I don't mind," Daniel said hooking his arm through Johnny's. "I mean actually I encourage it."

His ears were so red. They made their way to the counter and Daniel barely listened as the head librarian and Johnny talked.

He was being good. He'd be good. But his mind was spinning.

He usually was so focused on looking at Johnny that he'd never thought that maybe Johnny got distracted looking at him.

Oh he could use that. But how?

He'd have to run some experiments. Maybe he'd need to go shopping. Buy lots of shorts. He'd have to keep an eye on Johnny, see how he reacted. He never thought he had before, but he reacted...quietly. When Daniel wasn't looking. Or was lost in thought. He wondered how many looks he'd missed?

Maybe it was a bit silly. But he was pleased and really really want to grab Johnny and find a quiet secluded place. So far this trip was torture. Maybe they'd go straight to Moshe and Tristen's when they got home before going to Nonnia and Nonnio's.

He needed something. He'd take pretty much anything at this point.

It was a little quieter when they got back, less chaotic, but there was no chance to sneak off now. One of his great aunts had arrived and looked like she was already gone over the deep end. She was talking loud and fast about something and Daniel found a spot on the floor gently tugging Johnny down next to him.

Almost immediately, gifts began.

Johnny shifted uncomfortably next to Daniel.

"I don't have-" Johnny whispered.

Daniel's great aunt handed Nonnio a box.

Daniel squeezed Johnny's hand. "Your present is your presence."

He didn't look convinced. He didn't look comfortable. He looked...it didn't look good.

His hand in Daniel's was sweaty but cold. Clammy. Was...was he freaking out? Over a gift? Over not having a gift? Why would he-He remembered how Johnny struggled to come into the apartment. The way he jumped up to help whenever he could. All the times that when he invited Johnny ahead of time he came with something for his

mom. Wine, nice cheese, local specialties. He always had something.

Sid. It had to be fucking Sid. Every action Johnny had with people, with large groups of people was a transaction. A service or a gift. He wasn't welcome anywhere without it. Not with strangers.

Fuck. He hadn't even-

Oh no.

This was like throwing Johnny straight into the deep end without any prep wasn't it?

Sure Johnny had watched the kids, but that wasn't *for* Nonnio.

Daniel had worried it'd be awkward, he didn't think it'd be *stressful*.

He didn't think it'd freak Johnny out.

Daniel didn't have anything for Nonnio either to give Johnny to give Nonnio. He hadn't gotten anything at the mall. He'd been too upset and Nonnio had been adamant that their gift was just themselves. But Daniel hadn't *explained* that earlier. That the flight ticket out had been the gift. That he *truly* just liked their company. The gifts weren't necessary.

Daniel watched as his great aunts wine glass wobbled and her eyes swept across the room and landed on Johnny with a sudden sharpness.

Oh no.

Oh hell no.

"Hey Johnny," Daniel whispered.

He was listening but he wasn't speaking. He remembered Johnny on the beach in tears because Daniel had said he was worth more than a trophy. Something that should've been obvious. Of course he didn't think his presence was worth more than a gift. He hadn't believed his life was worth more than a stupid plastic trophy. And that was fucking Kreese. And they were working on it. But this...Johnny had fallen on old habits. Jumping when spoken to, offering to help, it was probably why he disappeared so much and then Daniel would find something fixed around Nonnio and Nonnia's apartment.

Sid had that awful neither seen or heard policy.

Was the whole weekend just fucking torture for Johnny?

What had he done?

He could see it. Great Aunt Elda was going to ask Johnny where his gift was and it wasn't going to be good.

She didn't know.

They didn't know that was a house of cards that was constantly in the process of healing and that this was a sore wound still trying to scab over.

She was going to jab right at it and ask what it was.

"What about blondie?"

Daniel shifted forward, he was going to start a fight. He was gonna-

"Let him alone."

"He's done plenty."

"Be nice to Johnny."

"He's cool, aunt Elda."

"Elda hon, he's already done plenty you just weren't here."

"Don't make the poor boy feel bad about it. We asked him not to bring anything."

"His name's *Johnny* aunt Elda. Not blondie."

"How many glasses have you had so far?"

The clamoring was loud and Daniel blinked in surprise, then looked at Johnny.

His head was bowed and he hadn't noticed.

He probably wouldn't notice anything.

Shutting down.

No one was paying attention.

He leaned in close and bit Johnny's ear, gently tugging, slipping his

arms around his waist.

"You know, aunt Elda is meant to be ignored, especially four glasses in. I'm sorry I didn't realize how hard this would be for you. But I'm 100% serious. So just listen to me okay? You put too much on yourself. Nonnia and Nonnio have a policy. New people only bring themselves. Family that doesn't live close only bring themselves. Nonnia and Nonnio would prefer to see our pretty faces rather than us sending a gift. They like hugs and seeing people in person. They like feeding people. So you being here is more important, it's more precious than any gift you could've brought with you. I know that's difficult, I know this is very hard, but I'm not lying. You might not have noticed but Nonnio gets lonely and you hanging out with him, even just reading nearby made him *so* happy. Like he's *that* easy to please. He'll probably talk about it for a long time. More than any scarf he gets today. The only reason Moshe and Tristen give Nonnia and Nonnio gifts is because they've lived across the hall for decades and they went nearly a decade before getting a gift. They're still Nonnia and Nonnio's favorite because they come over a lot. Now I'm in a lucky position of being pretty high up on the favorite list, but I mean come on, why wouldn't I be? Very lovable right?"

He saw the smallest twitch of a smile.

"But oh man, they also **really** like you. Ma said Nonnia made your sweater *before* we were dating. I can't believe that. Like how'd she know? I think Nonnia has- oh what's that mental thing where you can see the future? She can do that. No clue how or why but she started that sweater before you met. No idea how she found out your size. But like I was wrong okay? You didn't get the sweater because they like you ***with*** me, but because they like you. Sure they like us together, but you're cool. They like you on your own. And man that's a bigger compliment. Which means the whole not gift thing, the whole guest thing, which I get you struggle with being a guest- I did catch you doing Moshe and Tristen's dishes this morning you weirdo, it's all real. It's not a lie or a trick. And I know that's hard for you right? You don't have to win them over. They're trying to win **you** over. They want you to visit often. Heck even by yourself they'd be happy, but please let's come together huh? I'd get too jealous if you got to eat all of the good food without me," Daniel said pressing in close. "Plus after the realization I had yesterday I really don't want to give up any time I've got with you. I'm thinking when we get home, we'll spend time with our friends but maybe a lot of time at home, let's spend with just us huh?"

Johnny was probably thinking about dinners and watching TV and reading. But Daniel specifically meant their bedroom. But whatever worked to pull him back.

"Jeez, sorry. I didn't know. Sorry blondie."

"*Johnny,*" Nonnio said. "His name is Johnny."

"Right, sorry."

"We're already deep in debt to that boy, so please be nicer to him."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, he's been very kind, and we like him. Right *Tesero*?"

"Correct."

"What's he do?"

"Oh! I know the answer to that!" one of the girls said jumping up and darting out of the room.

"Karate and works in the tree shop with Daniel."

"Oh, another karate kid. How many of those do we have now?" Aunt Elda asked.

"Just the two I think. Johnny and Daniel."

"Wait, when did we get Johnny?"

"Almost a year ago."

"Was he here?"

"No he lives in California."

"Ah, doesn't Daniel also live in California?"

"Yes."

"So who does Johnny belong to?"

"That is a loaded question," Nonnio said with a deep frown.

"Daniel," Nonnia said.

"*Tesero*!"

"What? Elda, they're a match set."

Elda squinted at them. "Lucille adopted one? I thought she was struggling with money? Didn't she lose her job?"

"Oh, we really dropped the ball on keeping you in the loop huh?"

"Lucille is doing okay. She got a new job."

"Thanks to Johnny and his friends," Lucille said. "I didn't adopt Johnny, well he's family. But Aunt Elda he's-"

"My boyfriend," Daniel said.

"Oh, why didn't anyone say so? Why's it always got to be 50 questions?"

"Aunt Elda, that's because you don't pick up the phone. You're behind on like a years worth of news because-"

"I'm a busy woman. It hasn't been a problem until now. Up until now the family news was stuff I could digest in yearly increments."

"Well a lot has happened this year."

"Okay, so Daniel got a boyfriend, who you already dolt on and made him a sweater-"

"From *before* they started dating."

"What? Why?"

Nonnia sighed pinching the bridge of her nose. "I really need you all to just call more often, so I don't have to do this over and over again."

Daniel heard footsteps approaching and the girl stopped in front of them turning and holding a familiar magazine in her hands.

Daniel's heart sank. He'd been 100% sure he'd left that at home, but now looking at it in her hands it was sinking down to 70%.

What was wrong with him?

"This is you right Johnny?" she asked.

Johnny looked up, then at the pictures of himself and he looked startled for half a second before turning to look at Daniel.

He knew that look.

Did you bring those magazines with you? Seriously?

"I didn't!" Daniel said a little squeakier than he meant.

"Uh yeah, a friend's family works with the magazine. I've been doing it for a couple of years."

"I know," she said with a grin. "This isn't my copy either, this is Nonnia's."

Daniel didn't like that. Didn't like that at all. Why did Nonnia-?

At least it wasn't his.

He tilted his head, to look past his cousin at his grandmother who was whispering to Elda, trying to quickly and quietly fit a years worth of drama into quick whispers, but Elda wasn't responding quietly.

"I *know* that."

"Oh. I didn't know that. No one did anything? Oh good."

"Seriously?"

"What the hell!"

"No!"

"Really?"

"Good for her."

"Oh, is she here too? No? Why not? If you're going to adopt one you might as well adopt the whole family right?"

"Oh, they're what? What the hell is a Cobra Kai? No no I get the cobra part. That's a snake. But kai? Oh, yeah I don't get that. Oh there's four more of them huh? Why aren't they here? You haven't met them yet? Why not? You're legs aren't broken. You can still drive. You just said he's come here twice. Why don't you go there then? Oh yeah see even four glasses in I'm smarter then you two."

"Hmm. What's that?"

"Tree huh?"

"Daniel's got shit luck huh? Sorry kiddo."

"Good on him."

"I see."

"Oh really? I'd like to see that, oh is that it, let me see that magazine. So you called up the publisher and they gave you his measurements? Sneaky," Elda said laughing and flipping through the pages after Daniel's cousin passed it over. "Whose Ken?"

Daniel stared at Nonnia and Great Aunt Elda in shock then turned to Johnny who relaxed beside him a little.

"I have no clue where she got that," Daniel whispered.

"Oh, Nonnio told me," Johnny said.

He knew?!

"You knew?!"

"Nonnio explained the sweater yesterday," Johnny said looking down at it with a warm smile. "I like it, it's very cozy."

At least he was settling, the panic or stress, the spiral seemed to be fading.

He was still stiff though. Too bad they hadn't brought the bonsai with them. He had a feeling that would've helped. Anchored him.

Daniel pushed down the questions he had. All hundreds and thousands of them and pressed in close again.

He hoped it helped. It helped when he was sleeping.

He couldn't help himself he had to ask.

"Did Nonnio explain *why* Nonnia has that magazine?"

Johnny shifted to press his cheek against the top of Daniel's head, arm hooking around him. "You mentioned it to them. So they got curious."

"I did?"

"Apparently you talked about me **a lot** in your calls to them."

Daniel shifted uncomfortably.

Had he?

He tried to remember his calls home.

He hadn't liked calling home.

He hadn't liked explaining how everything was going. Not at first. But then he supposed with the guys and Johnny taking him out every weekend to do fun things...he probably did talk about that.

"Apparently you told them mundane stuff like you didn't think I liked celery."

Daniel's face burned.

Had he-had he really just talked non-stop about Johnny? Celery?

He did remember that though.

Johnny always ate all the food on his plate unless one of his friends wanted it. He didn't waste food. But that'd been the first day he'd watched Johnny struggle to eat something. Slowly eating them with a frown on his face. He'd thought Johnny was one of those kids who was picky. But then he realized it went with everything else. Wordlessly suffering. He'd taken a few off his plate and Johnny had looked so grateful.

Daniel remembered how badly he'd wanted to kiss him then. He'd thought he was so easy to please. He'd nearly leaned over in the cafeteria to kiss him. Now he kind of wished he had. Because Johnny had liked him then.

Nonnio opened up a few more presents and Daniel listened to Johnny's breath, felt his steady heart beat and tried not to think about how easy it was to tell that Daniel liked Johnny from the start. How obvious it'd been to everyone but Johnny and for a time, Daniel himself.

They had dinner, all sitting at the big table his Nonnio and Nonnia

loved.

Johnny sat next to him, all polite poise, a little glittery and sparkly from a project he'd done with the kids while Daniel had helped set up.

Maybe one day he'd relax. Or maybe it was too engrained. But he could try to throw him off balance by putting his hand on Johnny's thigh.

It was what he'd wanted, what he'd been craving for so long. Ever since his mother had packed them up their rickety Chevrolet Chevelle Malibu to move across the country.

He had missed it. Missed listening to his cousins talk about school, about family things, about how comfortable it was, how easy. But he was itching to go home.

It was a weird realization.

He'd been wanting this, *exactly this* and now that he had it it turned out it wasn't it.

He wanted those breakfast mornings with all of his friends crowding into their apartment to talk.

He wanted to sit at Mr. Miyagi's table with Sato and Yukie and listen to them playfully bicker. Watching as they worked to heal decades of pain, of lonliness and missing one another and the glimpses he caught of them, what he thought they must've been like once upon a time before Mr. Miyagi left. Three best friends finally reunited.

He missed the girls, Ali playfully teasing him about Johnny. Kumiko's warm smile, Jessica's laughter when she was joking with the guys. He missed the shop, he missed his car, he missed the Avanti and tacos at Abuella's and hell, he kind of missed Chozen.

He'd realized California was home last time he'd come to Newark. But he hadn't realized how much it'd replaced his home. Now that his mom was in California too.

It wasn't a constant craving anymore.

It was like something had settled into place. A realization that he'd grown up, become someone different since the last time he'd been home. That nothing had changed but he had. He'd changed a lot.

He looked at Johnny eating arancini di riso, tuscan chicken, and filetto di pomodoro, the way he kept tucking his hair behind his ears. The way he listened, the kids, aunt Elda talking to him when they could, fighting to talk to him.

Daniel wanted to kiss that ear, wanted to whisper in his ear, take all that attention he was giving everyone else for himself. But he could tell, they were finally being charmed, finally realizing how nice it was to have his attention on them.

It wasn't as good as Daniel got it, and he felt a little superior, that he knew what it was like to have Johnny's undivided attention, all his focus, a relaxed Johnny who was comfortable with him.

Daniel wrapped an arm around Johnny's back, letting his fingers trail up his spine, running his fingers, a ghost of a touch, wanting to feel the softness of his longer hair. Johnny had mentioned wanting to cut it and Daniel feared it was the one thing he agreed with Chozen on. He liked it. He didn't want it cut. Let it grow out. Just a little more. More for Daniel to touch, to feel how soft it was, to play with while Johnny was falling asleep.

He was ready to go home the next day.

Ready to fly home, ready to curl up in his bed with Johnny.

Ready to walk through their own space, to soak up the quiet of it all. To taste Johnny's skin on his tongue.

The cake his grandmother made was delicious and Moshe and Tristen had brought over the gelato they had and shared it. It was perfect.

Johnny was talking, smiling and charming.

Daniel got an idea, his gelato was going to melt while he was politely listening.

"Johnny," he whispered.

Johnny turned.

"Ah."

"Ah?" Johnny repeated confused.

Daniel grinned slipping the spoonful of gelato into his mouth. It reminded him of cooking, of Johnny walking by but stopping to taste

test something. He also just liked putting things in Johnny's mouth.

Johnny must've caught something Daniel didn't say because he turned away a little pink.

"It's good right? Gelato?"

"Yes," Johnny said, hand over his mouth.

Maybe he'd buy some, see if they sold any in LA. They had to right?

Daniel shut the door behind him, finally free of cousins and family and dinner. Finally, in the room they were staying in at Moshe and Tristen's.

"Let's try this again," he said slipping his hands up under Johnny's sweater.

He already knew the deal. Try to be quiet, but it was more of a challenge to see if he could make Johnny make sound while staying quiet himself.

He bit his lower lip, he wasn't sure if he could but he'd for sure try, he refused to give up.

This was the most exciting challenge he'd been given and he hated that it'd been interrupted the night before. Even if it'd been precious and adorable.

Johnny's skin was warm under the soft sweater and Daniel squeezed his pecs. Usually he didn't like to be too telling that that was his goal, that he liked touching Johnny's pecs but he didn't want to waste time tonight. He was going to go straight for what he wanted and that was squeezing at Johnny's chest and pushing him up against a wall, kissing him.

Johnny's arms snaked around his waist and down into the back pockets of his jeans.

Daniel grinned. Maybe Johnny had been wanting to do that all day too. At least since the library. He'd tease him about it later. After they were sated and curled up in bed together.

He ground his hips against Johnny's pulling away from the kiss to listen to him gasp. He wondered how much weight he could hold

himself. Could he hold Johnny up between him and the wall? He wanted to try.

He let a hand drop down, pulling one of Johnny's legs up and over his own hip, testing.

He had been able to lift Johnny up off the ground awhile back, just a little, and with the wall taking a lot of his weight it should be-

There was a knock.

"*No*," Daniel said.

"Cuz!"

"*No,*" Daniel groaned letting his head fall against Johnny's neck. "I hate my family."

"You don't," Johnny said, he was smiling.

How was he amused? How was he fine?

"Daniel!"

Johnny rested his head against the wall and laughed, carefully pulling his leg out of Daniel's grip and lifting his hands to Daniel's hand on his chest, hands gently around his wrist, guiding one out of his sweater.

"Let's go see what they want."

"We're doing this, exactly this way again later."

Johnny gave him a quick kiss.

Daniel sighed looking at where Johnny's sweater was all rucked up and gave another squeeze then reluctantly pulled away.

Johnny fixed his sweater.

Daniel supposed this was better then yesterday. They hadn't gotten as far...kind of.

He glanced in the mirror. He looked a little disheveled but not in a way he cared about. He checked that Johnny was okay and then pulled the door open.

Christopher had brought friends. They stood as a group outside their

door and as soon as Daniel opened it they beelined straight for Johnny.

"We didn't get our story."

"Oh, uh, right, sorry," Johnny said turning and digging around for his book. "Want me to come back to Nonnio and Nonnia's to read to you?"

The kids were climbing onto the bed and Daniel had a bad feeling.

"You *can't* sleep here," Daniel said.

"We're not going to, we're just going to enjoy the story from here."

Daniel frowned.

Johnny looked at Daniel and Daniel shrugged.

It was fine. As long as they left.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and sighed.

Johnny opened his book and began to read.

Daniel made himself comfortable looking up at him, watching him read.

It made him nostalgic for...had it been over six months since they'd been to school together? Since those nice sunny days where Johnny had read to him their English assignments?

He'd missed that.

Oh, idea...inappropriate idea while his little cousins were around but he'd add it to the list.

Daniel nearly fell asleep himself and sat up quickly when he heard Johnny shut the book.

Johnny smiled at him warmly then turned to look past him and he frowned, not a deep frown but like a quiet sigh.

Daniel pushed himself up and followed his gaze.

They'd all fallen asleep.

Every last one of them. In their bed.

Damn it.

If he tried to wake them up.

If he tried to kick them out his aunts and uncles would yell at him.

That was their bed now.

"What do we do now?" Johnny asked.

"Sleep in the living room?"

"You going to be okay on the floor?" Johnny asked gathering up the things he'd need after his shower.

"I'd rather that then sleeping on the floor here. We will for sure get stepped on."

Johnny nodded, gathering up his things and walking past him towards the door, then he stopped, turned back and kissed his cheek before heading off to shower and get ready for bed.

Daniel turned back to his bed. All his cousins sleeping peacefully.

He gathered up his things, changed into his pajamas and headed out to find the linen closet. He dug out bedding and found a spot in the living room. He moved aside the coffee table and that seemed to be enough space. He set down bedding and pillows.

Next time they came home Johnny had to do story time. All kids had to have story time in their room or else they'd ruin Daniel's evening plans.

They had to stay at a hotel. Somewhere where they could have privacy. If anyone asked this would be the #1 reason, being kicked out of their bed by a bunch of kids.

They had to bring Johnny's warm winter things and sweater.

Unless it was summer.

He had to let Johnny bring a small gift. He'd talk to Nonnio and Nonnia about that one.

Daniel sunk his head back against the pillow with a sigh.

Why'd he even bother to bring condoms and lube?

It wasn't going to happen before they left.

But he would challenge Johnny later to read to him, see if he could keep reading to him while he sucked him off.

He wanted to see if Johnny would be able to keep focused on the story.

He wanted to lock the door when they got home and never leave. What was he supposed to do at school without Johnny?

Learn. He was supposed to learn things he wanted to learn and hopefully make new friends...but he'd miss looking at Johnny, at teasing him throughout the day, riling him up and watching him go, because he loved to watch him go.

He heard soft footsteps and looked up at Johnny who looked around and spotted the makeshift bed and Daniel in the dim light.

"There you are," he whispered leaning down and kissing Daniel before lifting up the blankets to join him.

"I'm sorry," Daniel said.

"Huh?"

"I really thought it'd be better. This trip. That my family would be...cooler. I guess I should've sent out a newsletter or something entitled, *Daniel and Johnny no longer enemies, now boyfriends*."

Johnny laughed pulling Daniel close.

"I'm sorry you got...kind of hazed. There's all this stuff I didn't notice or think of until I saw it happening and it pissed me off. But you won over a lot of my family all on your own, so I hope...I hope you're okay and if you're not, you'll tell me right?" Daniel asked gently brushing hair from Johnny's eyes.

"I think... your set up is hard for me. Showing up without something. I've always had something to give or try to give. I don't know what to do with myself otherwise. I don't feel comfortable."

"Because of Sid?" Daniel whispered.

Johnny pressed his head against Daniel's shoulder. "Yeah, probably. I think if I don't have anything to give, then what's the point of letting me in?"

His voice was shaky.

"My family is not like that. Hell *most people* aren't like that. It's not some transaction. You don't have to give a gift to be allowed through the door. You don't have to supply a service. You don't have to play Santa Claus every time you visit or see anyone. You, Johnny Lawrence, are good enough. Like okay, the guys, you didn't bring something over to their house every time you went to visit them?"

"I tried to, as a way of saying thank you for inviting me over, for being my friend," Johnny said. "I bought their parents flowers."

"Johnny, they just wanted to spend time with you you didn't...have to...you," Daniel sighed he didn't know how to express the frustration he felt. Not at Johnny but at the situation, that engrained feeling. "You're worth more than you think. So much more. But next time, if it'll help we can bring flowers. Not a bunch, like one bouquet. Okay? And you can tell my grandparents what it means, but you don't need to get some for everyone, because everyone can enjoy it with my grandparents. You don't owe anyone anything. Hell I still owe you. I'm still very deep in kissing debt."

Johnny laughed softly a little watery but he pulled back and kissed Daniel. "We'll have to work on that."

"Hell yes we do, and so much more. I'm falling behind on my payments."

"And interest."

"There's interest on this debt? That was not in the fine print."

"It was."

"Where?"

"It was implied."

"I'm never going to get out. This is going to kill my credit score....actually it might boost it. Credit scores are weird."

"They factor in kissing debt?"

"Might as well," Daniel said gently kissing him.

Behave. He had to behave. This wasn't a room with a locked door. There was a small mob worth of little cousins in their bedroom, there

were godfathers around somewhere, his mother.

He gently brushed his thumbs across Johnny's cheeks.

He'd had a feeling he'd been crying and he had. His cheeks were wet.

He kissed him deeply.

He wished he could heal everything quickly. That he could protect Johnny from any harm. He wished he could say everything he felt as eloquently and as passionately as he felt it. He wished he could show Johnny the Johnny he saw and how loved he was and how he didn't need to hide behind gifts or flowers or actions to be welcome. But if it helped then that's what they'd do. And it'd be nice. Nice to go to a flower shop with Johnny to pick out flowers for his grandparents. Because he wasn't saying no to next time. Johnny was bravely facing his fears like he always did.

Johnny shifted beside him, pulling away and Daniel wanted to complain, to ask where he was going but then he was leaning over him, kissing him, a warm quick kiss before shuffling lower and Daniel nearly bolted up, nearly grabbed Johnny and demanded to know what the hell? All this time, all this talk about being quiet and being careful and appropriate times and places and- He quickly covered his mouth with his hand.

This wasn't fair.

He was the one who had to be quiet.

How was he supposed to be quiet? When Johnny was between his legs using his mouth like that? And he'd been crying? Seriously?

The one time Daniel decided he probably *shouldn't*, that he was going to just suck it up and wait until he got home and that was when Johnny decided to take his sad pretty face, he didn't like that, but Johnny was adamant with his tongue and Daniel swallowed down a moan. He dug his heel into the bedding, the floor, trying to ground himself, trying to be quiet, trying to focus on breathing and not Johnny's warm mouth, trying to stay still, feeling Johnny's hands gently on his hip, his thigh, giving himself more space.

They were going to talk about this later. Talk about how this apparently wasn't obscene, but Johnny thought doing it in the shop was. Daniel was going to dig around, find out why. Because if the line was just the difference in the act, then Daniel would get revenge. He

wanted to touch Johnny's hair, wanted to particpate somehow, but it was dark and he feared he might accidentally poke Johnny in the eye or something. That'd be his luck for the day.

He lifted the blanket, looking in the dim light at Johnny, focused, then Johnny's eyes met his and that damn smirk.

He *knew*.

He knew what he was doing. He knew that Daniel couldn't stay quiet if he did that. He knew and he looked so satisfied about it. Like he'd won. It *had* been a competition. And Daniel had lost. Daniel had let family run him out of his goal and Johnny had seen an opportunity and had taken it and fine, *fine.* Johnny won. *This time.* He wouldn't win next time. When they got home Daniel was going to get his revenge and make Johnny so loud that their neighbors complained despite the soundproofing.

He didn't want to let the blanket go, gripping it tightly in a fist while he watched, trying to breathe, trying to remember, trying to be quiet, not used to trying to be quiet and struggling, soft sounds escaping unbidden and he hoped that no one was around, that no one was awake, that he was quiet enough to not be heard by anyone but Johnny.

Daniel wanted to be home so badly. He *needed* to be home. He dreamed of their apartment door, of Johnny looking up at him from their bed, the way his hair would fan out, the way he'd moan when Daniel was in him.

Daniel let go of his mouth. A terrible idea, but he had to. he reached out, down, gently touching Johnny, brushing damp hair from his face and tucking it behind his ear. It smelled like Johnny's shampoo under the blanket, the kind that made his hair silky and soft and smelled nice and damn he was too far away to bury his face in it, but he wanted to, he wanted to press his face in close, but Johnny wasn't going to stop until Daniel had nothing left to give.

Maybe he'd been as disappointed as Daniel had been the day before, today too. Maybe he had been looking forward to spending time together, a stress relief, maybe it was what he needed too. Daniel couldn't hold the blanket up any more, falling back and grabbing a pillow to cover his face, to try and muffle the sound of his moan. To hide while he caught his breath again.

Johnny slid back up along him, carefully tugging the pillow out of his

hands, out of his tight grip.

"What was that?" Daniel whispered.

"I thought it was fairly clear."

"I know that bit, but what about all the being quiet and respectful and-"

Johnny shifted down to lay on his side next to him, "You didn't like it?"

Didn't like it? Who was he? Of course he liked it. He rolled onto his side. JDaniel wrapped his arms around him, curling in close.

"Yes," Daniel said.

Maybe he'd get his revenge now. Just a little. See how Johnny could handle it. Slipping his leg between Johnny's, smiling when he felt how hard he was. He'd take care of that, see how Johnny could stay quiet.

"Hey now," Johnny whispered. "That look is-"

"Says you," Daniel said with a soft breathy laugh.

"Your hand is cold."

"It'll warm up."

"Daniel."

"Hmm?"

"Hotel next time?"

"Fuck yes."

"I'll remember to read to the-uh-kids."

"Shh,"

"*Daniel*."

Mmm. He liked that, leaning closer and biting Johnny's ear ever so gently.

"You're the ones who made the rules," Daniel said softly in his ear. "I'm just reminding you. The agreement was to be quiet."

Johnny's hands were on him, holding on tightly, pressing his face into Daniel's shoulder. It'd be quick, even though there was so much else Daniel wanted to do. He didn't want to chance it. He didn't want to push his luck. Plus most of his stuff was in a toiletry bag in the bedroom.

"You can be as loud as you want when we get home. I promise," Daniel whispered.

He could feel Johnny's uneven breath against his skin.

He kissed whatever was nearest him, Johnny's damp hair, his ear, gently guiding him, surprised he wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't been so close, surprised at how quiet Johnny had been. He didn't like that. He preferred Johnny louder, relaxed. Not the quiet shudder and hitched breath.

Johnny won though. Which was one was quieter was definitely Johnny, but Daniel never wanted to try that again. He already was too quiet, too withdrawn. He hoped that he hadn't accidentally asked Johnny to do something, to be quiet that would be like the other things, reverting him to bad old habits. But he couldn't check until they got home. He'd make sure if it was a thing, it wouldn't stick around. Less than 24 hours, and then they'd be home. One nights good sleep, breakfast, and then that was it, they'd be home and he could start fixing any damaged he'd accidentally made.

In the morning they had breakfast early at Nonnio and Nonnia's. Pancakes and eggs, and bacon that his Nonnia made. It was quiet. The kids had gone as a hoard to get donuts down the street with a tired uncle. Tristen and Moshe joined them and Lucille across the hall for breakfast, talking softly about comforting things. It felt unreal. To be going home. But Daniel was ready. Though he'd miss his Nonnia. He'd miss the snow. He'd miss his family and his godfathers and Newark.

Moshe and Tristen volunteered to drive them to the airport and they said goodbye. Johnny got hugged by all his little cousins who refused to hug him. Daniel threatened to come by himself next time and they complained, whined, one gave him a look like an adult would say *Don't screw this up*. Which made Daniel laugh. He got his hugs though.

Johnny didn't hold on tightly or stiffly to the door on the drive to the

airport, just watched the scenery pass as everyone talked, holding Daniel's gloved hand in his own.

At the airport his godfathers gave him tight hugs telling him to come back soon. Hugging his mother so tight that she lifted up off the ground and surprising Johnny with a hug as well much to Daniel's delight.

The flight was good. Better than the flight there. He didn't spend it arguing with his mother, just talking about all the things they'd learned, about family and things they noticed and missed. Like LA, how good it'd be to be home again.

He was so happy when they walked out of the airport at LAX, on the drive home, feeling the warm sun on his skin. They dropped his mom off and then headed home. Daniel's hand on Johnny's leg, tracing random designs along his thigh. He remembered his goal to find shorts as soon as possible. Nice shorts, and to see Johnny's response. But he had other things planned for when they got home.

There was something about being home that was such a relief but also lonely. Quiet. But it was nice to be in their own place, carrying their stuff into the apartment. It was nice to wrap his arms around Johnny and pull him close, bury his face against his chest.

"Welcome home," Johnny said.

Daniel smiled. He always said that. Every time they walked through that door, every time Daniel walked through it at least.

He'd told everyone the wrong time. That they'd be home that night, rather than that morning. But the time difference made it easier. And now, finally, they were alone. No kids. No cousins. No aunts. No uncles.

It was a relief, like a breath of fresh air to just be. As much as he loved them. He was even happier to be *home*. But he could be even happier. He took Johnny's hand gently pulling him towards the bedroom.

"I told everyone that we wouldn't be home till tonight," Daniel said. "We've got all afternoon. Just you. Just me."

Johnny stopped walking about halfway through their apartment and Daniel frowned.

Why was he stopping?

The universe hated him, didn't it?

He turned back to look at Johnny wondering what was wrong.

Maybe he'd gotten sick?

No way. His Nonnia had made breakfast. No one in the history of time had gotten sick off of LaRusso cooking.

Johnny's hands came to the sides of his face and he kissed him.

Oh.

Johnny's arm hooked around his waist pulling him in close.

Oh.

Daniel kissed him back. Bed. So close.

Johnny pulled away.

Now.

He stepped back, pulling Johnny with him to the bedroom and this time Johnny followed. Daniel dropped his bag at the door, taking Johnny's and setting it aside as well. Daniel locked the door then worked his way out of his clothes, watching Johnny follow suit.

Next time they visited his grandparents, next time they went to Newark they were staying at a hotel. They were going to be somewhere outside of walking range of little cousins and family. And he'd pick the place, he'd make sure Johnny didn't book something expensive. Something nice but sensible with thick walls and a nice bed. Maybe a bath.

Ma could stay with his godfathers but Daniel was booking a hotel so that when they left his family for the night *they left*. They were going to be out of reach unless it was an emergency. So that when he tried to have sex with Johnny no one would interrupt. Their time was limited before school caught up, before he moved on from the bonsai shop, before life whisked them away and kept them busy.

How many other Monday mornings could he play hooky and just have sex with Johnny?

Not enough.

He wished he'd known earlier. That they'd moved faster. They could've played hooky from school and done this instead.

The bruise he'd started a couple nights ago was fading.

He'd start there. Bring that back to life. Because here Johnny could be loud. He wouldn't stifle himself and neither would Daniel. Or at least he hoped.

He pulled Johnny close. Johnny had a stubborn look in his eyes. Mischievous.

Johnny kissed him then pulled back. Away.

He pushed Daniel down on the bed, following him down, kissing him and straddling his hips.

Daniel's brain short circuited.

Was he going to? Yes. Yes he was.

Daniel ran his hands over the tops of Johnny's thighs, entranced, looking up at him. He tucked golden blonde hair behind his ear as he started to push himself up. Daniel wasn't ready for that and pulled Johnny back down to him, kissing him, tangling his fingers in the blonde hair. Johnny had mentioned Sid had a specific place he used to send Johnny and Johnny hated it, but he hadn't gone anywhere on his own to get his hair cut...his entire life.

Daniel wanted to do it.

He also didn't want to do it. He liked how long it was.

He shouldn't be trusted.

He wanted to keep that door locked and not leave.

He took Johnny's wrist gently in his hand and kissed it looking at how Johnny responded.

He was going to make it worse.

He was going to clarify while his brain was still functioning which he doubted would be much longer.

"Are you going to ride me, Johnny?"

Johnny flushed red, leaning over to the nightstand to get the lube and condoms.

He wasn't looking at Daniel, somewhere off away.

"Yes," he said softly.

Daniel took them from Johnny.

"I said yes," Johnny said looking at him.

"I know, Let me...start it."

"I know how to do it."

Daniel pushed himself up smiling. "I know, but I missed touching you."

That firery red returned to Johnny's skin and Daniel ran his fingers gently along Johnny's spine, smiling up at him, coating his fingers and sliding one in.

He wasn't sure how he was focusing because his brain kept shorting out. Like it was failing. Too distracted by how beautiful Johnny was, how nice the view was of him like that. He'd wanted to savor it but if he did, if he took too long Johnny would take over and maybe he'd lose any chance. For the moment.

He might be able to catch Johnny off guard and do something again later, but he also wanted to lay back and enjoy.

Two. It'd be easier with two to find-yup, Johnny arched back with a warm moan, hands on Daniel's torso.

He grinned, the worry in his chest disipating. The quiet night at his godfathers hadn't stuck around.

He probably could-no, he'd let Johnny continue with his plan. For now.

Three and Johnny was looking at him with such a heated look that Daniel thought his heart might stop. He needed to find that box, asap. There? Now to get it without losing his momentum, not the sounds Johnny was making. He needed to never leave this moment. Needed to just savor the moment, savor Johnny, he didn't need to worry about the future, he didn't want to think about it or worry about it. He just wanted to enjoy the present, enjoy the way when he nodded at Johnny, the way he moaned when he started to sink down, the way he

felt it in his toes.

How could he tell Johnny how he felt?

"Just like that," Daniel said hand on Johnny's thigh. He usually was doing so much more that he didn't know what to do. "You've got it."

Johnny gave him a look that said *Clearly* that nearly made him laugh.

How was he so lucky? All that muscle was on display as Johnny moved carefully.

"Beautiful."

His ears were red, he heard him, but he was ignoring him, focused. At least he was being careful, gentle with himself.

Daniel had been worried. He always tried to be so gentle or as gentle as he could with Johnny and feared with how stressful meeting his family had been that Johnny wouldn't be.

"Just a little more," Daniel said.

It was weird. He never would've thought this would be where he'd be. Not the view he would've ever expected he'd get to see on that beach. But it was a great view. He slid his hand up from Johnny's thigh, up along his hip and abs, to his pec. "Almost there."

Johnny stopped, turning his head towards the door.

Daniel heard footsteps the sound of the front door shutting.

Nope.

Nope.

Whoever it was was leaving.

Their door was locked.

Daniel was going to hold onto this thread.

He'd been stopped too many times the last couple of days. He let his hand trail back down and wrapped his hand around Johnny's length. Johnny looked back at him startled.

"Doors locked, no one has a key for this room. It's just you and me and

at this point I don't care who hears now."

Johnny flushed red at that.

Maybe Daniel didn't fully mean that. He didn't want anyone they knew to hear. But whoever had been there was gone now. He leaned up to kiss Johnny and Johnny made a soft sound of surprise when Daniel moved, putting his hands on Daniel's shoulders to steady himself. He moved his hand. Johnny kissed him back and Daniel waited, waited for those gorgeous muscles to move. He was so steady on his knees.

He wanted Johnny to focus on him. Johnny looked at him, shifting and moving and Daniel moved his hand in time. Johnny gasped putting his hand on Daniel's wrist.

"Daniel, stop, I won't-*ah*"

"Please."

Johnny looked startled.

"You first," Daniel said.

Daniel wanted to find a way to tell Johnny that everything was okay. That their trip had been a success and that Johnny shouldn't ever accept anything other than love from his family. Any rudeness, well Daniel was going to send out a long newsletter or something, explain who Johnny was and for them to piss off with anything mean or negative because Johnny was his boyfriend and he was going to hold onto his hand for as long as he could and he hoped that'd be forever. He was going to be around for a long time and they needed to get used to the idea. But he also had a feeling that that'd sunk in.

He didn't want to share this. He didn't want Johnny to find someone else. *He* didn't want to find someone else. He wanted this to continue. He wanted Johnny in his bed, in his home, making him forget how to speak because he always knew the thing that would throw Daniel off balance, but always in the best possible way.

He wanted that smile to shine on him, he wanted that heated look that he saw more often now to only be directed at him.

He wanted this to just be theirs. There were things he let go without a fight, fights he tried to avoid, but he didn't want to let go of Johnny. He'd fight for this, to keep him.

Johnny shifted, hands on Daniel's chest, the look he was giving Daniel made his breath stutter in his own chest. If Johnny didn't hurry up then it wouldn't work the way they wanted.

Daniel ran his free hand along Johnny's abdomen, his chest watching Johnny shiver, listening to him, entranced, trying to breathe, center himself, calm himself so that Johnny would-there. Daniel let go, right behind him.

He pulled Johnny close as they both settled.

He kissed the top of Johnny's head and Johnny looked at him, tired, sweet, relaxed.

"I missed you too."

Daniel blinked, feeling his face burn.

Johnny smiled, moving himself up and kissing him while Daniel stared at him stunned. Did he mean? If he meant- then maybe just give him a minute and Daniel was pretty sure he could go again. One minute. Maybe less. And Johnny could enjoy as much as he wanted.

Johnny laughed softly.

"What's that look?"

"Let me just recover for like a minute and then I think we can-"

Johnny laughed, "You recover, I'm going to take a shower."

"*No*."

"Yes. I feel gross after the flight, I'm surprised you don't."

"I mean I do, but... if you want to-"

Johnny pushed himself up. "We can't hide in here all day. We will be disgusting."

"I don't mind."

"Really?"

"Okay I mind a little. Fine, you shower then I'll shower and we'll see where we are then."

Johnny smiled kissing him gently.

Daniel slumped back down onto the bed with a frown, watching as Johnny put on a robe and very carefully poked his head out of the door unlocking it and looking around, determining the coast was clear he slipped out the door, shut it and Daniel heard the shower turn on and sighed throwing an arm over his head.

He'd wanted to cuddle. Wanted to curl up next to him and just feel his breath, his heart beat, wanted to take just a beat.

He laughed softly. Was this revenge for all the times he made Johnny get up and go after? Like the beach?

At least he didn't ever leave Johnny behind. He felt left behind, lonely. But also tired. Tired from getting up early because his little cousins had run out as a hoard, surprised and entranced at having spent the night at Moshe and Tristen's, from Moshe and Tristen standing over the makeshift bed with their coffee and setting cups out for them, his mother asking him *why* they were sleeping on the floor in the living room, trying to be quiet to let Johnny sleep more but all the commotion woke him up and Daniel had tried so hard to let him sleep in.

It was just so comforting to watch him sleep. It was like the softest sweetest reminder of how far they'd come, because he was *actually* asleep, not just pretending to be asleep like he once had done. It made his heart feel so full. Gave him hope and comfort and made it hard to get out of bed, or to want to wake him up.

After awhile, having fallen asleep, Daniel woke up to a dip in the bed and a gentle drip of water. He felt disgusting, just like Johnny had mentioned as he sat up. Johnny kissed his cheek.

"Do we have any plans today?" he asked.

"Dinner. Always dinner," Daniel said groggily, getting up and heading off to shower.

He kind of hoped Johnny wouldn't get dressed. But he himself was yawning.

Everything in the bathroom was covered in condensation and the air was still steamy. But the water was nice and the pressure was good. It hadn't been great when they moved in but Johnny had fixed that first thing. He'd set up the shower shelving so that there was enough space

for all of Daniel's stuff and Johnny's. He'd installed the shower curtain, fixed all the creaky doors, patched the screens in the windows and all this stuff Daniel would've just suffered through or asked the maintenance person to fix. Johnny had just done them.

Daniel thought he learned a lot from Mr. Miyagi, but really Johnny was a sponge, collecting all the lessons Daniel didn't have the time or patience for.

A part of him was a little jealous how well they got along, how easily, how unspoken everything was.

He'd watched them once, repairing something in one of the old cars on the lot and Mr. Miyagi didn't even have to ask for the tool he needed, Johnny put it in his hand automatically. But Daniel didn't know how good that was.

Was it a deep bond of two quiet peaceful men or was it a leftover need to please?

Was it part of that survival mode to anticipate the needs of others left over from Sid, or was it from Kreese?

Or both?

Daniel wanted to be that, self-sufficient. He was learning how to fix cars, he knew how to cook, he could do finance, but he couldn't fix a leaky sink, he didn't trust himself not to flood the apartment.

Johnny didn't need anyone or anything now.

Daniel worried he wasn't contributing enough, chewing on his lip.

He didn't want Johnny doing everything, didn't want him doing everything because he felt he had to.

Daniel scrubbed at his skin with a frown.

He was going to be starting school soon. Starting a new chapter. That was new people. People who didn't know about karate or Johnny or who probably hadn't been to Okinawa. Might not even have heard of it. He didn't know if it was a relief or frustration.

Everyone around him knew. Knew about Johnny. Knew about all the pain and all the struggles, all the good times and the bad.

He was getting a chance to become anyone.

He could do anything.

He could just be some guy who moved from Jersey who moved to California.

He could be just be a guy who did soccer on the weekends.

He got to choose what people would know about him.

He could keep them at bay. He could make himself successful, normal.

Normal?

What did that even mean?

Daniel hadn't known normal since he'd left Newark the first time. Doubted he'd known it before then, even longer.

His normal wasn't anyone elses. His normal was getting into fights with rich millionaires who had too much time on their hands like he was in some bad Saturday morning cartoon and he was supposed to be some superhero kid solving mysteries and stopping the bad guy, but in reality, he was just a guy trying to live his life.

A guy who badly, *desperately* wanted to just live his life.

He wanted to romanticize the mundane, for *that* to be his life.

He didn't want any more adventure.

He didn't want to seek it out.

He wanted just his morning cup of coffee in his favorite cup.

He wanted to go dancing.

He wanted to make new friends who knew nothing. And then later, maybe he'd open up. But he just wanted to be one of the guys.

He'd be the guy who went to baseball games with his classmates, or to the bar, he'd listen to people talk about their drunken hookups, and he'd laugh at their bad jokes, and he'd just exist, and then he'd go home and he'd curl up next to Johnny on the couch and watch TV and he'd make dinner and eat with him and make love.

Maybe sometimes Johnny would stop by for lunch, wait for him outside his school or his business, that red jacket and long blonde

hair, leaning against the Avanti, the epitome of cool.

And maybe people would wonder. But no one would ask. And Daniel would know that the coolest guy he knew spent his time at the library reading books and cried when the cow at the sanctuary got sick, or that he liked to spend his evenings playing koi koi in a garden that would become a secret garden in Daniel's heart.

Something for him, something for the people in his life up to this point but not past it.

A place he went to spend time, *peaceful time* with Mr. Miyagi, to get advice on how to deal with awful bosses from him, on how to deal with mundane life issues, and no longer a desperate plea to teach him how to defend himself. How to survive.

He craved it. Just like he craved that muted smell that was filtering in but would never admit it.

Daniel laughed, rushing to finish up his shower.

He rinsed soap off his skin and hurried out, with a towel wrapped around his waist.

"Are you seriously frying baloney? Nonnio and Nonnia sent us home with so much food and *that's* what you're making?" Daniel asked, hands on his hips.

Johnny laughed. "I wanted to save that."

"Save it? Why?"

"I thought we could pack it for lunch for your last week at the shop. I thought it'd be comforting."

Daniel blinked back tears, that was the sweetest, thoughtful-he watched as Johnny turned, blue eyes taking him in, the towel, the wet skin and Daniel's mouth went dry. Johnny reached out and hooked an arm around him, pulling him in close and Daniel's hands flew up to catch himself, practically lifted off his feet when Johnny kissed him. Pressed close to the soft cotton of his shirt, the rough denim of his jeans and Daniel nearly told Johnny to forget about their lunch. To forget about sandwiches, that they could just go straight back to their bedroom, but then Johnny moved, lips pulling away from his and kissed his forehead. Soft and loving Daniel melted into the embrace, wrapping his arms around Johnny and staring at the baloney frying in

the pan with an acceptance that that was his lunch.

They left before the sunset in the Avanti. They were having dinner with Ms. Lawrence and Daniel looked at the houses in Encino hills wondering, not for the first time what it'd be like to live there. His mom lived close, on the border, but Daniel wanted to live there on his own. He thought he'd feel like he finally made it if he put down roots there.

It was nice to be in LA again. To take comfort in the palm trees and the warm air. So different from Newark. It didn't feel like January. It didn't feel like winter. To think that morning he'd nearly slipped on a patch of ice carrying his luggage to the car. But now he was somewhere sunny and warm with clear skies was so weird.

Johnny reached over and Daniel's heart pounded expecting Johnny's hand to go to his thigh, and it did, but it was flipped up, not groping.

Daniel put his hand in Johnny's, looking over at him as he drove, wearing sunglasses and blonde hair being whipped around in the wind.

His heart ached. He loved everything so much.

Except the smog. He never even liked the smog.

But driving with Johnny? He loved that. He loved how comfortable Johnny looked, how at ease, as he drove through those streets he knew so well. Daniel knew with Johnny he'd never get lost in LA.

Laura was waiting for them when they arrived pushing open the door as they were getting out of the car.

She held out her arms and Johnny hurried, not to keep her waiting and Daniel smiled, it was cute.

The big hug he gave her, the tight hug she returned.

"Oh, I missed you so much!" she said. "How was Newark? How was the flight? Did Nonnio have a good birthday? Did you eat well? Who am I kidding it's LaRusso's it'd be a criminal offense if you didn't."

Daniel laughed softly coming up the steps a little slower. His Nonnia had made cookies expressly for Laura. She'd pulled him aside "Your

great aunt is right, if we're adopting one, we're adopting them all, start with is mom. We're working on that. She's sweet, please give her these. No one can resist being pulled into our ranks when confronted with our cookies. And these are the big guns," she said tapping the top of the container.

His grandmother's cookies were amazing and Daniel had worked very hard, struggled, to not eat them on the flight over, to not sneak one that morning or afternoon.

"I missed you too," Johnny said carefully pulling away, or trying.

"Nope, one more minute," Laura said tightening her grip.

Johnny laughed, returning the tight hug.

Daniel smiled shaking his head and kissed Laura on the cheek slipping past into the house to put the cookies away and to let them have a moment.

Jessica's shoes were by the door and he wondered if she was around.

"Yo!" the red head called from the couch.

"Hey! I thought you might be here."

"I am! I wanted to see you guys. I have to head out soon, we're going to another play."

"Another play?" Daniel asked leaning over the back of the couch looking down at her.

"Yeah, Ali said she found a happy ending play so we're doing a re-do."

"I'm missing something," Daniel said.

"Oh, we took Chozen and Kumiko to a kind of sad musical. West Side Story I think? I'm not one hundred percent sure. I didn't get the brochure or see the title. We went in through the back. But Ali I guess felt bad so we're going to do a take 2 of our day out. So I think this time we're going to an opera? She got actual tickets. We're going to dress up and everything. I gotta get changed in," she looked at her watch. "Ten minutes. But I'm watching this murder story and I got to know how it ends."

Daniel laughed looking at the TV.

"Clearly it ends with someone dying."

"We're past *that* part. I wanna know if the guy or gal got caught," Jessica said. "Oh, I think you guys are doing take-out for dinner. Maybe get something other than pizza? We've eaten a lot of pizza. I think she's secretly sick of it. She's all smiles and says we can have whatever I want and I keep wanting pizza."

"Not sick of it yet?"

"We're trying different ones. We've almost tried every type this one place has and we're ranking them before I leave. So no pizza."

"Good to know. Are you all...getting along?" Daniel asked.

"Yes, of course! Wait, why?" Jessica asked looking up at him.

"Chozen's pretty....prickly."

Jessica laughed. "He seems like it doesn't he? But he's actually quite sweet. He's putting a lot of work into the dojo, and it's pretty much all him. I also think, I mean the guys were talking and I think maybe he's been through a lot."

Daniel sighed "He's a dick."

"Reformed."

"Yeah and how's he proven he's reformed?"

"He borrowed my jacket and took it dry cleaning before returning it."

"So? Wait the pink one?"

"Yup. That's pretty polite and unnecessary."

"He also made us all lunch yesterday."

"*All*? Whose all?"

"The guys, Ali, Kumiko and I."

"Where at?"

"The dojo. He's been cleaning up and there's like an apartment near it that apparently something the uh...previous owners owned. And it came with it. I think he might be planning to move in there and out of

Mr. Miyagi's. It's not fully fixed yet. There need to be some repairs done. But it should be nice."

Daniel frowned.

Chozen moving out of Mr. Miyagi's would be nice.

He wouldn't feel weird every time he went over.

Or he'd feel less weird. But it kind of was weird.

"Wait so you went to this apartment?"

"Yeah the guys said they'd never been. So I assume no one knew it was part of the property. Like there's the main dojo space right, and then there's an office and a locker room, but then there's also an apartment. Kind of like a secret space. I don't know if that's creepy or not. I mean with the past owners, creepy."

"Huh. So he's staying?"

"Well yeah."

Daniel wondered if that meant Sato and Yukie were also staying. Mr. Miyagi would like that. Would Sato and Chozen live together at the dojo?

He had a whole bunch of questions that felt too nosey.

"Was it good?"

"What?" Jessica asked engrossed in her show again, about brutual murders.

"Uh the food?"

"Oh, yeah, Chozen's a great cook. Kumiko explained what everything was and everyone loved it. Dutch even asked if Chozen would teach him a few of the recipes. Which was kind of funny because Chozen got this look on his face like he couldn't understand why or how or what was happening but he agreed. So they're going to have a cooking class soon. I think Tommy was going to go too. I would, but Kumiko wants to go to this dance performance and Ali said she can get the three of us cheap tickets so we're going to do that instead."

"I'm glad everyone's getting along," Daniel said though he felt a little jealous.

A little bitter that everyone got along well and was having fun without him. While he and Johnny were out he was kind of bummed that they'd went from teasing and bickering with Chozen to hanging out with him on purpose.

Betrayed.

Jessica glanced at him and flicked his forehead.

"Hey!"

"Stop that."

"Stop what."

"I know that look."

"What look?"

"You get this stubborn self distructive streak where suddenly the world is falling but you're making a bigger deal out of everything. Chozen is a person. He's not...he's not Barnes or his friends or Silver," she said quickly rushing through the names. "He's a guy who's working hard to redeem himself and whose been nice. He knows he fucked up. Those guys, they didn't give a shit. There's a difference. And the guys...well at least Tommy's a pretty decent judge of character."

"What does that even mean?" Daniel asked rubbing his forehead.

"He says he thinks Chozen needs just a little kindness and care. Even Ms. Lawrence likes him."

"*What*?" Daniel squeaked.

"He came over and helped the guys with a project in the garden. Ms. Lawrence said he really just needs a little love," Jessica said picking up a can of soda and taking a sip.

"A little love," Daniel huffed. "He *wants* Johnny's love."

Jessica coughed on her soda looking up at Daniel.

"Seriously? That's where this is coming from?"

"What, of course seriously! He loves Johnny."

"Jealousy," Jessica said with a sigh. "You get haunted by that emotion a lot huh."

"What?"

"You have Johnny right. He loves you. So why are you worried?"

"Out of everyone telling me to chill-," Daniel said. "Should I remind you of one Elizabeth Anne Rooney?"

Jessica's frowned. "Chozen is no Elizabeth Anne Rooney."

"But you know that's what happened to you right? Someone else swooped in and-"

"My boyfriend fucked up and isn't anything like Johnny."

"Are you two still dating?" Daniel asked.

Jessica sighed. "No. We broke up again. But Daniel I didn't have what you have with Johnny. My boyfriend's eyes wandered a lot. He flirted all the time saying it was harmless fun, but it wasn't, because he couldn't stop himself. Johnny doesn't flirt with other people. Heck, I'm not sure I've seen him flirt with *you*."

Daniel laughed. "He does sometimes."

"He also just softly kisses you in the most loving way. I don't think you've got to worry about Chozen. There's no opening there. Unless you fuck up and make one."

She said waggling her finger at him and then heard something from the TV and turned gasping. "No way!"

"What?"

She pointed at the TV screen. "That's exactly what I feared!"

Unsolved.

"That murderer could still be out there or anyone. That's terrifying!"

"It's from one hundred years ago," Daniel said. "Whose your murderer? A vampire?"

"Oh, right. Still, those poor victims," Jessica said looking at her watch. "Oh shoot. I gotta hurry."

She jumped up, hugging Daniel. "Welcome home, nice to see you again," she said before darting off to the guest room to change.

"Daniel, what do you feel like eating for dinner?" Laura asked walking in and patting his shoulder.

He turned, she was smiling softly at him and held her arms out for a hug.

He hugged her, smelling her light sweet perfume.

"I was thinking we could order out, what sounds good?"

"Chinese?" Daniel asked.

"Sounds good to me, Johnny you okay with that?" Laura asked walking over to the kitchen. She opened a drawer and pulled out a menu.

"Sure," Johnny sat down at the island looking over the menu she passed to him.

Daniel leaned against him, arm around his shoulder looking at the menu as well.

Johnny took the pen and paper his mother got out and wrote down what he wanted then passed it to Daniel who quickly wrote down his soup and sweet and sour chicken with rice and passed it back to Laura who smiled and dialed the number with manicured nails.

Johnny turned to Daniel, shifting in the stool and wrapping his arms around Daniel's waist pulling him close.

"Mom was thinking we could watch a movie. She rented a whole bunch. So we'll catch up, see some of the updates to the garden and then a movie. Sound good?"

"Yes," Daniel said.

He wanted to kiss Johnny on the lips, a french kiss, because he looked so sweet sitting at his mothers house, at ease, comfortable and because Jessica was right, he was unnecessarily jealous over nothing. Possessive. He tried to stamp it down. He'd already spent most of his morning and afternoon enjoying his time with Johnny.

"Want to see the pond?" Laura asked. "It's not done but your friends came over saying they're pros at it and I'm pretty impressed."

Daniel stepped back from Johnny reluctantly and followed her to the sliding glass yard and outside. The pond was smaller than Mr. Miyagi's. No balance wheel would fit there but it was still nice. A bench had been put near it, one of the weeping trees was curled over it and it was full of water already and flashes of gold, white and red.

"Koi?" Johnny asked walking out and kneeling to peer into the water.

Daniel resisted the urge to push him in, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"And I got some lilies, they won't bloom yet I'm going to also get snails and tadpoles maybe a few more plants, we'll see. I think it's a good start."

"It's great Mom."

She smiled and it was so warm and fond.

"You should see the hydrangeas. They're blooming already," she said pointing to a spot in the corner where purple and pink flowers were blooming. They were big and poofy.

"They're pretty," Daniel said. "Oh, before I forget Nonnia made you cookies."

"So that's what's on the counter top," Laura said with a smile.

Jessica's head popped out the sliding glass door, she was wearing a black dress with a layered frilly skirt, hair done and wearing make up. "I'm going out Ms. Lawrence, Ali should be here soon."

"Have fun Jessica, say hello to everyone for me."

"Of course!" Jessica said putting on her shoes and coming out to hug Johnny.

He lifted her up off the ground with a big hug.

"It's good to see you, even for a moment," Jessica said.

"*Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing*," Johnny said setting her down gently when they heard the honk of a car.

"Bye have fun!" she said waving and hurrying out the garden gate.

Daniel hooked his arm through Johnny's.

"How about some lemonade?" Laura asked. "You can tell me about your trip."

Daniel nodded following her back inside, arm in arm with Johnny. They sat on the couch together. He told her about Nonnio's birthday, about the food they ate, about the flight, talked about the snow, buying Johnny a winter jacket.

He felt nervous. There was something about the way she was sitting, like she was waiting for something.

"Were they nice to him?" she asked Daniel and that was it.

His heart sank.

"No," Daniel said slumping his shoulders and rubbing his face. "No, and I didn't let Johnny bring a gift and it was a mess."

"It wasn't a mess." Johnny said protested.

"You nearly had a panic attack."

"That wasn't-"

"It *was* Johnny," Daniel said.

"How did it end?" Laura asked picking up her glass of lemonade and taking a sip.

"I got apologized to, but a lot of people," Johnny said.

"You did?" Daniel asked turning to look at him surprised.

"Yeah, before we left while you were talking to your Nonnia. A lot of your aunts and uncles apologized. And I got lots of tearful hugs from your little cousins. Heck, even Louie gave me a hug."

"Louie Jr.?" Laura asked with an amused hug.

"Oh, all the kids loved him," Daniel said warmly.

"So it wasn't awful?" Laura asked.

The question wasn't directed at him, she was studying Johnny, motherly concern. Searching. After so long of not being able to check in on him, to make sure he was okay, learning how much he hid, she was preparing, to make sure, to look for cracks and to peer in and make sure, *for sure* that he really was okay. She wasn't going to let him lie about being hurt anymore. She was going to hold them accountable, to make sure everything was good and okay and that he was happy and healthy. And Daniel was going to be held accountable. Just like Johnny was and had been.

Johnny picked up his glass of lemonade and took a sip then drummed his fingers on the side of the glass.

"We talked about it. I'm going to bring them flowers next time and I'll feel better. And Daniel's going to fight any of his cousins who look at me wrong."

Laura laughed and Daniel flushed red.

"What?" Daniel said.

He *had* said that, or something like that.

"I'm joking," Johnny said. "But Daniel did say he'd get into a fight with them. So I don't feel too bad and when I was...panicking, he stayed with me and I'm okay. They're being protective of him. And I get it. They haven't caught up with the memo. But his godfathers, his little cousins, his grandparents, they've all been very nice to me."

"I'm glad."

"Oh and Lucille checked on me a lot."

Laura nodded sitting back, her posture relaxing and Daniel's nerves calmed.

Johnny's hand found his.

"What did you do while we were out of town?" Johnny asked, thumb running over the back of Daniel's hand in a way Daniel loved.

"Worked on the garden, started a pizza ranking system with Jessica, had lunch with Yukie and checked in on all your friends."

"How are they?" Johnny asked.

"They were worried about how you were handling a mob of LaRusso's."

"Is that what we're going with?" Johnny asked with a laugh.

"Until I'm told something better," she said with a smile. "I'm going to the dojo tomorrow."

"You don't have to," Johnny whispered stiffening beside her.

"I want to see it. Plus Jessica won't stop talking about it. She loves it."

"She does?" Daniel asked surprised.

"Apparently Chozen's quite the artist. I'm going to take photos and see if I can do something."

"Mom, be careful," Johnny said.

Daniel agreed.

Chozen was best kept at arms length, out of range of his feet and fists.

She smiled softly. "I'll be gentle."

Huh?

"He's been through a lot."

Daniel had been through a lot. What had Chozen been through?

"We talked about that a little," Laura said turning her gaze to Daniel. "I'm adding him to my brood Daniel, so I need you two to get along. You don't need to be friends. But no fighting."

"What?"

"You know in a game of chess where you steal the other players pieces?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm hoarding them all. I'm not giving them back," Laura said. "And I must say I'm doing a decent job. Your mom and I are going out for brunch tomorrow. And I've got a lot planned. I couldn't spend time with who I wanted or do what I wanted and while at the time I was disappointed that Sid didn't want more kids I'm grateful we didn't have any, but now I get to just adopt my own. So Chozen, I'm adding him to my hoard of stolen chess pieces. And step one is visiting the dojo."

Johnny shook his head amused and Daniel stared at her in confused horror.

"Chozen's dangerous."

"Chozen is mourning."

"Mourning? Mourning who?" Daniel said.

"Miyagi Senior," Laura said. "Everyone mourns differently, I'm sure

you're aware of that Daniel."

Why did he feel like *he* was in trouble? He wasn't the one who made Mr. Miyagi's life hell. He wasn't the one who destroyed Miyagi Seniors stuff....Mr. Miyagi's father. Mr. Miyagi hadn't seen him decades. But he'd said that his father taught Sato karate...it was possible that he also taught Chozen. Chozen hadn't been there when Mr. Miyagi's father had passed. But he'd been at the funeral. That angry scowl on his face. Daniel had thought that was directed at them. But maybe...had it all been... Daniel had been angry when his father passed. Mostly at himself. At the universe. At the doctors. He'd snapped at people. He hadn't known karate. But if he had...would he have reacted the way Chozen had? Would he have acted that way if someone he didn't know showed up to his father's funeral who hadn't been in his life for decades and if they drew all the pity to them even if it was deserved?

Daniel wouldn've hated them. It was *his* dad.

Was that how Chozen had felt? Daniel didn't know what Chozen's relationship was with Mr. Miyagi's father.

He didn't know...anything about Chozen. Except that he liked Johnny.

"Oh," Daniel said.

"It still doesn't excuse what he did to you," Laura said gently leaning forward, patting Daniel's knee. "You didn't deserve any of that, you shouldn't have been treated like that. It doesn't erase anything, not how you feel. I don't mean to say you should let things go. I just want you to be aware that Chozen is staying and he's probably going to try and make a life here in LA, and I think he's more than welcome to do that. And if he needs help, I will help. And you'll see him around because you have an overlapping social circle," Laura said.

"Do you approve of him?" Daniel whispered a sudden panicked thought threatening to take root.

"You mean how he feels?" Laura asked eyebrow raised.

So she did know. She caught on to things fairly fast so Daniel wasn't suprised. But he didn't trust himself to speak.

He nodded.

"He says he's going to wait till your dead."

Daniel scoffed. "I'm going to outlive him, I'll live till I'm over 100. Not a chance."

She laughed softly. "I hope you all find happiness. But as a mother, I'm pleased that so many people like my boy," Laura said getting up when there was a knock at the door and kissing the top of Johnny's head.

"But I'm your favorite right?" Daniel asked turning as she grabbed her purse, looking at her over the back of the couch, that panic not fading.

"Johnny's my favorite," she said pulling out her wallet and opening the door, paying, thanking the person, and taking the bag of food.

"I love you too Mom," Johnny said.

"You're both infuriating," Daniel murmured. "You do that too."

"You usually benefit from it," Johnny said warmly kissing him before hopping up to help her organize the food on the kitchen island.

Johnny was right.

Usually, he picked Daniel, saying it was because he loved him. And it drove everyone else nuts. He wouldn't take a side, would just pick Daniel. That was what mattered.

Laura liked him, and that was good, but Johnny picked *him* and that was the important part. The part that mattered. That Johnny loved him.

He got up and hurried over to join them, to join them, settling his nerves knowing he'd been picked, chosen, and he got to be the one to curl up on the couch with Chinese food and watching movies with the Lawrences.

Johnny was taking a shower and Daniel was sitting on the couch watching TV. There wasn't anything on that could hold his interest. He'd tried watching a few games. He'd tried thinking about his impending classes and the things he needed to prepare. But all he could think about was that somewhere very close Johnny was naked and soaking wet and he was missing out.

He tried one more channel, tried watching some grandmother explain how to cook something before turning the TV off and heading to the

bathroom. He chewed on his bottom lip. He reached for the door knob then stopped, paced.

Johnny should be allowed to have his own space, should be allowed to shower without being interrupted. Time to think and process the day and the future days.

On the other hand, there was lube and condoms in a little waterproof caddy in the shower already just begging to be used.

Should he knock?

He should knock.

He wasn't a monster who would just sneak up on Johnny while he was naked. He didn't have a death wish. Johnny could still kick his ass. And it'd be warranted if he snuck up on him like that. And that was a concussion waiting to happen.

He knocked.

He waited.

He knocked again, louder.

"Yeah?"

Daniel pushed the door open a little.

"Can I join you?"

The air was full of steam and Daniel waited.

He was so close.

Johnny was thinking. Or startled.

He wanted to look but he wouldn't. He'd wait.

"For a shower or do you want something else?"

"Honestly?"

"Honestly."

"Both?"

"Priority, top pick."

Daniel ran his hand through his hair, pushing it back and sighed. "Sex."

"We've tried shower sex and you didn't like it."

"Yes, but I want to give it another shot."

"Okay. I just...wanted to remind you that you didn't like it."

Daniel pushed the door the rest of the way open taking off his clothes and dumping them on the tile before pushing back the curtain.

"True, but, I want to try something different."

Daniel had expected for a second for Johnny to hide when he pulled open the curtain, but he didn't. He just turned to him, curious and amused.

"What is this different thing? Be exact because one of the reasons you said never again was because you thought we'd slip, fall and die."

Daniel stepped in next to Johnny moving close, pressing up against him.

"I want to see if I can lift you."

Johnny laughed. "If any thing was going to lead to us falling, hurting ourselves and dying an embarrassing death trying to lift the other in a wet area would be it."

Daniel bit his lip, pouting a bit.

Johnny was right but he wasn't going to be deterred.

He'd been thinking about it and the corner of the shower might let Johnny brace himself against it and that might give him more to work with.

"It's not going to be a lift just in the middle of the shower."

"So then what is it?"

"That corner."

"Then what even is the point of the shower being on?" Johnny said.

"Easy clean up?"

"It's going to be a waste of water."

"I'll skip my shower in the morning."

"Seriously?"

"What? I'm showering with you tonight. It makes up for it."

Johnny sighed and brushed wet hair out of his face.

"And if this doesn't work?"

"Then I'm hitting the gym until it does," Daniel said.

He knew Johnny could do it. If he wanted Johnny could scoop him up and wouldn't even need a wall to pin him against. But Daniel needed to try. The thought just kept popping back up ever since they'd been in Newark.

Johnny's eyes had headed south and he nodded. "Okay, but don't hurt yourself."

Daniel grinned, opening the shower caddy.

"I was wondering what was in there. I should've known."

"You just don't snoop do you? Like you can just look in there, I don't mind."

Daniel turned back to Johnny and hooked his arms around his neck, kissing him under the stream of warm water. A couple steps back and Johnny was against the wall and he hoped that it'd work.

"This is going to be the most embarrassing ER trip," Johnny said.

"Hey," Daniel said. "It might work. Don't jinx us."

Johnny frowned. "It's really better to lift where it's not wet, where it's...safer. Like a thousand things could already go wrong just with that bit, but the water, what if you lose your footing? Do you seriously want to die with your dick in my ass?"

"Sounds pretty good to me."

"If we get hurt we deserve it."

"*Johnny.*"

"Okay okay, just I don't want you to die."

"How come in this scenario I die and you live?"

"I'll mourn you forever, he was full of great ideas, and then had one absolutely terribly stupid one that killed him."

"That's what you're going to say at my funeral huh?"

"Well it'll be the only thing I could say publicly."

"Privately?"

"His insatiable libedo killed him."

Daniel laughed pressing a kiss to Johnny's neck.

"I can try something to help," Johnny said.

"How?"

Johnny looked thoughtful, "Step back a little, I think I can..." he shifted his stance, pulling away when Daniel stepped back, kicking up his leg, sending water everywhere. He had a focused look. Daniel had seen Johnny do high kicks. He'd been on the wrong end of those kicks. He'd never seen one like this though.

"Seriously?" Daniel whispered. "Why didn't you do this earlier?"

"What?" Johnny asked.

"If you can get your leg that high-" Daniel had a million ideas going through his head.

He would have to see how long Johnny could hold that position. What other positions he could try?

He'd forgotten.

How could he have forgotten? Forgotten how good Johnny was at karate, which meant...he'd have to check out that book from the library again. The one with all the poses and ask Johnny which ones he could do. It'd be a total misuse of karate. To use it like a menu, or karma sultra. He was almost mad at himself for not realizing sooner. He'd known on his birthday that things might be possible but he hadn't explored it, hadn't thought about it again, he hadn't...

"Are you ready?"

Daniel blinked. Right. Focus. Future sex had to wait until *after* current sex. Johnny pushed himself up onto the tips of his feet, his ankle resting on Daniel's shoulder and Daniel moved in closer until Johnny was against the wall, arms around him, bracing for whatever Johnny was going to do.

"Still think I'm going to die?" Daniel asked.

"We're about to find out," Johnny said lifting his foot completely off the ground, eyes not leaving Daniel's. Focused on him, like he was a focal point, like Daniel had used growing up learning skating, like he used for spins.

Every time he thought Johnny did the hottest thing he'd ever thought was possible he always found something new to make Daniel feel weak in his knees. But he couldn't be weak this time. He grabbed Johnny's thigh, hiking it up over his hip, pressing close.

"Please tell me you already-" Daniel whispered, pressing his forehead to Johnny's chest trying to not rush with the need coiling hot in his stomach.

"I was not expecting you to join me," Johnny laughed. "How you doing there?"

Lube. Hurry before his legs gave out. He could do this.

"Can you keep that position?" Daniel asked. Then remembered the water, felt how slippery everything was, and worried his lip. "As much as I like this, maybe your leg should be here too, I think that's too much of a....I love it, but..."

Johnny nodded and Daniel braced himself, carefully helping Johnny move the leg from his shoulder to his hip.

"Better, safer. Though we'll try something with that later."

"We're going to die before you finish your list."

"Of old age."

"The only old people in the nursing home still getting it on," Johnny laughed.

"Think they'll let us share a room? Or will we have to sneak out to

visit each other?"

"I hope things are better by then," Johnny said softly. "I want to share a room."

"We'll be what? 80? 90?"

"I'm not planning to move into any sort of home until well after 100."

Daniel laughed. "We're going to have to change our habits if we want to live that long."

"Hey man, I plan to subsist of off beer and baloney well into my 60's."

"Okay stop making me laugh, I will drop you."

It was harder than he thought to prep with his arms full of Johnny. But he was determined, he just had to-

"M-*ah*-ybe I'll drink coors banquets and prepackaged ham. I'll buy the good stuff and share it with you. Peak decadence."

"I hate you," Daniel laughed. "You know that won't happen. You're going to be eating nice Italian meals and fucking salads."

"I do not want to fuck a salad," Johnny said seriously nose wrinkled.

"Stop it," Daniel said. "This is hard."

"You're hard."

"Oh my god."

"I think I'm good."

"Thank god."

"Thank *you*. Though Daniel, if your knee-"

"Do not worry about my knee right now."

"I have to, you're the one wanting to chase me around a nursing home when we're old. Gotta make sure you'll still be able to keep up."

"Not worried about your self there?"

"What? Hell no. *Ahh!* wa-rn a guy will you?"

"What did you think was going to happen?"

"I was distracted," Johnny said softly. "And I can't...well normally I can...you usually take your time"

Daniel kissed him, gently pulling him closer, as close as he could.

"There."

"There he says," Johnny huffed into his neck. His legs were tense around Daniel's hips fingers digging into his back. Too tense. It'd been easy enough...but maybe...

"I'm not going to drop you."

He was kind of holding on like a startled cat, nails digging into Daniel's back for purchase. Maybe all the talk, all the jokes were for his nerves, maybe he was up for the adventure but terrified that they'd fall and wouldn't make it embarrassingly horny octogenarians. Daniel hadn't just...well maybe he'd used gravity to go a little faster than normal, fast and deep. He had no clue how he was going to move. But with Johnny like that he wasn't going to. Couldn't.

"If we fall I'm landing on you," Johnny managed through gritted teeth.

Next time Johnny said he was ready Daniel was ignoring it and continuing to prep for a little longer. He'd gotten impatient.

"I mean where else are you going to land? You're kinda attached," Daniel said with a grin. He could play the same game and yup bright red. Though maybe that'd been a bad idea because nothing about Johnny relaxed. "Hey, don't you faint on me."

"Why would I-"

"You're all locked up, you've never seen someone lock their knees and then just face plant?"

"I'm not going to f-face plant I can't. I can't go anywhere. Wasn't that the point?"

"Added bonus," Daniel said kissing him, trying to get that furrowed brow to relax. "Sorry," he whispered into his skin.

"You are not."

"I am! But you did say you were ready."

"That is not an apology."

"I'm sorry that it...hurt? Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure."

"Pretty is right."

"I think your brain stopped working."

He was relaxing a little, which maybe meant he could shift his stance? A little? The nails that had been digging into his back had stopped.

Johnny's vice grip had relaxed.

He was breathing, deep, meditative breaths, eyes shut, leaning back against the wall. His fingers only dug into his shoulders a little when he shifted.

Had he hurt Johnny? Not enough apparently to have dispelled his interest. Thank god. He looked up again and flushed red, Johnny had caught him, blue eyes dark and an eyebrow raised.

"What are you doing?"

"Just checking."

"Did you go numb?"

"No."

"Because if you did we gotta stop this."

"I am not numb. I just wanted to check you were still interested. It's no fun if you're not."

Johnny laughed, a soft sound, pushing wet hair from his face again, *damn*, Daniel grit his teeth trying to stay still, to breathe, to stay steady. They should've done this sooner. It was a constant wish a pang of regret that they'd been stupid and slow and just hadn't tried. That he hadn't looked closer. Because maybe if he'd seen it, the cracks

Johnny had hidden he could've saved him and doing that could've gotten them out of a lot of trouble and into one another's arms.

But he was happy. Now. He liked their apartment. All the plants on the balcony. The comfortable couch where they watched games and TV dramas, where Daniel suspected if Johnny ever got sick would turn into telenovela central. Where they watched movies and ate microwave popcorn.

It was so nice to be home. To spend time with Johnny, to have a place to go, their own little world. A bathroom with great acoustics, which he'd noticed last time but had hated the sometimes wet, sometimes cold and not in the shower part of the process. The water in his face. But this corner, it was good.

Johnny let go of him a little and pressed his hand against the other wall like he needed something to hold onto and that helped but also was distracting in the best/worst way.

"Still okay?" Johnny asked, voice all breathy.

"Amazing."

He might regret it in the morning though, but at the moment, he was going to enjoy it.

But.

"Are you okay?" Daniel asked, a beat later, concern flooding him like a splash of cold water.

"Yeah."

"Yeah?"

Johnny nodded kissing him.

It took a couple of tries to figure out how to move, how to balance, and Daniel was right, the acoustics were perfect.

♥♡♥♡♥♡♥♡♥♡♥♡♥

"I'm just...going to sit on the bottom of the shower for a bit. Want to join me?" Daniel said sinking down, knees weak.

"Not yet."

"No?"

Johnny shook his head moving to get into the shower water, leaning against the wall. His entire back was a bright pink, slowly turning red.

"Oh shit," Daniel said.

Johnny passed him a bottle of shampoo and soap.

"I know I said I was going to, but really?"

"Yup, otherwise all of California is going to be super pissed at us for wasting water."

"Fine, I'm saving our shower-escapades for hotels."

"We are not doing that again."

"What? Why not?"

"Because," Johnny said taking the soap and washing Daniel's back, "we fucked up each other's backs."

Daniel hissed, it stung.

"I'm sorry for scratching you up," Johnny said kissing the top of his head.

"You haven't seen *your* back," Daniel said with a sigh. "You're right, that was one of my less than good ideas."

"Less than good?" Johnny asked with a laugh.

"Hey, I only say that due to the danger and the fact both our backs are all scratched up, speaking of which let me see yours?"

Johnny turned and Daniel sighed getting up carefully.

It was surprisingly difficult. His knees were bothering him. He would never admit that because Johnny would worry and send him out of the shower and straight to bed. He'd start fussing. But he mostly felt euphoric and he was going to keep pushing through leaning on endorphins.

He rinsed off which was unpleasant before focusing on Johnny's back. It could've been worse he realized, but it still wasn't great.

"Okay, fine anything that requires first aid and could kill us is a bad idea," Daniel sighed. "Even if it was good...it was good right?"

"Yeah."

Johnny turned, gently pulling on Daniel's shoulders pulling him under the water.

"Hey!"

"I'm going to wash your hair."

Daniel sighed. "Fine, next time we'll do it in a bath."

Johnny laughed.

Daniel leaned his face against Johnny's chest, into his skin while Johnny washed his hair.

"That will at least be a set amount of water," Johnny said.

"That's one thing I miss about the east coast, no one cared."

"I'm sure *someone* cared. Also how much water were you wasting?"

"Listen, in a tiny apartment it's one of the few places for privacy."

"I can't believe I thought you weren't interested in sex," Johnny said shaking his head.

"Right? All your radars are completely broken."

"What does that mean?"

"You can't tell when people are flirting with you or hitting on you or trying to get in your pants."

"Sometimes people are just being nice."

"I was not being nice, I was literally trying to cop a feel as much as possible."

"Not always."

"Fine, not always. I did start touching your knee because you were sensitive about your shoulders and neck."

"See? Sometimes people aren't flirting."

"But I was totally subconsciously flirting with you. I was totally begging to get laid."

"Close your eyes," Johnny said.

Daniel did and felt lips on his before his head was pushed back into the water and fingers rinsed out his hair.

"I still can't believe you couldn't tell," Daniel complained. "Like we could've been doing stuff like this in like February of last year."

"You still didn't really like me then."

"I did too. I liked you at like the end of January. I wanted you to like me in February. I made you candies. Did you even eat those?"

"I did."

"You got a ridiculous amount of chocolate," Daniel complained. "I thought you gave me cookies some girl made."

"I made those. Didn't you read my note?"

"I didn't notice it at first."

"I was up almost all night making those for everyone."

"See! You made yours for everyone. I made mine just for you."

"I made one heart," Johnny said. "You're the only one I gave that to."

"I tried to keep that for like a month," Daniel said. "But then I ate it because I didn't want it to go bad."

"I'll make you more if you want."

"Yes."

Johnny smiled kissing him again. "The guys also dressed me up and you didn't notice that either."

"The guys dressed you?" Daniel asked with a laugh.

"Yeah, they wanted to make sure I looked nice. They thought it'd get your attention. I was wearing Bobby's clothes."

"You already had all my attention. If we hadn't done study groups I

would've failed like half the classes we shared."

"You wouldn't have."

"I really would've. I spent all of Valentine's day trying to figure out how to give you my chocolate and got intimidated by all the girls who'd swarmed you and the fact you already were buried in chocolate and candies. But I did notice you looked nice. But you always looked nice to me. Hot is a better term. What did you end up doing with all of those sweets?"

"Shared them with the guys and Mr. Miyagi."

"Why didn't you share them with me?"

"Because you ran off pretty quickly and because I wanted to make sure I got you your cookies. I was nervous."

Daniel laughed hooking his arms around Johnny's neck. "You nervous? *No*."

"Make fun all you want. You ran away."

"Did you share the truffles I made with the guys?"

"No."

"Did you like them?"

"Yes. Everything you make is amazing."

"True, of course, even love right?" Daniel said nodding and grinning watching Johnny's ears turn pink.

"You're like a rabbit."

"Cute and cuddly?" Daniel asked.

"Deceptively innocent looking but just constantly wanting sex."

"You're avoiding the question," Daniel said.

"Seriously?"

"Yes seriously. Now I'm starting to worry."

"Isn't it obvious?" Johnny asked face pink.

"You've put up with a lot in the past, maybe you're just putting up with bad sex. I need feedback, a review. Give me stars. What do I need to improve. A grade. Something."

"But I always-"

"You could fake it."

"*How*? I honestly don't know how. Do you know how?"

"I mean you could think about-"

"No."

"You didn't let me finish."

"Because I know whatever it is I don't."

"Well, now I could've said *anything*."

"I'm sticking to my answer."

"We lost track of the point."

"*You* lost track of the point. I gave you my answer."

"That's not feedback."

"It is if you're paying attention. And you usually are."

"True," Daniel said grinning up at him. "So you want to go again?"

"That was not where I was going with that. Not in here."

"Oh, that's not a no. You know, I must be improving, you don't say no as much anymore."

"That's not why I was saying no."

"Really?"

"This is our own space...and I...feel more comfortable with it," Johnny said turning to the shower finishing up and then turning to the curtain, pushing it open.

"Wait you weren't comfortable?" Daniel asked while Johnny dried off with one of their fluffy towels that his Ma had helped them pick out.

"You gotta relax to enjoy it. Let your guard down. I wasn't very relaxed for a long time," Johnny said drying off his face and moving onto his hair, motioning for Daniel to finish his own shower and Daniel grabbed the soap. He was bursting with questions he needed to answer.

"Does that mean I- I didn't force you to-" Daniel tried to think of the right way to ask quickly scrambling out of the shower once he finished his speed cleaning, turning off the water and not realizing Johnny had come back with a towel for him, barreling straight into him.

"Gotcha," Johnny said wrapping him in the towel and kissing him. "Nope. You didn't force me to do anything. I just couldn't let my guard down in a lot of spaces and it took a long time to feel comfortable doing that. Like the woods was fine, no one knew we were there or where exactly we were, same with the hotel."

"So it wasn't me?"

"No, of course not. I had my guard up constantly, almost all the time. I rarely slept while at Sid's, and in Okinawa I started to relax but I was also on guard because you and Chozen kept fighting and Sato kept causing trouble and then there was the storm. And then I saw Silver break into the house and I just didn't feel safe at Mr. Miyagi's either or at the shop. But now that they and Sid are behind bars I feel...better, safer. Plus the security here is the best."

"So you can finally relax," Daniel said thoughtfully. "You didn't have to be on guard all the time, like you know I wasn't expecting you to-"

"It's a habit," Johnny said. "It's why I appreciated everyone being in my room at Sid's that last night."

Daniel frowned. "I wanted to have you to myself there."

"You mean for sex?"

"Yes."

"That wouldn't have gone probably how you wanted it to. I couldn't relax that well at Sid's."

Daniel sighed. He'd liked the idea, but Johnny was right. The dazed kissing he'd gotten was probably the best he would've gotten. Even if he'd gotten further Johnny might've gotten nervous or made some

weird connection or something.

"Can't beat a first time during a meteor shower," Johnny said kissing him gently before pulling away and grabbing the first aid kit.

Daniel wiped off the mirror and turned to look at his back over his shoulder, there were angry red marks.

"You didn't go that deep."

"Still."

"We'll have to do your back too then," Daniel said arms crossed.

"*You* will have to do my back then."

"Give me," Daniel said holding his hand out.

"Not yet, I gotta patch you up first," Johnny said pushing open the door and walking off to their bedroom, first aid kit in hand and towel wrapped dangerously loose around his waist.

Daniel blinked looking at the stuff left behind in the bathroom. Clothes to sleep in. Did that mean nothing to sleep in? He liked that idea.

He hurried off after Johnny.

Johnny tapped the space on the bed between his legs getting out cotton swabs. At least it wasn't the green stuff. Daniel put his hands on Johnny's thighs taking a seat and leaning forward so Johnny could work.

"I'm surprised we haven't injured ourselves before now," Daniel said.

"We have," Johnny said softly.

"I mean during sex."

"Oh. Wait why?"

"Well, we used to spar and then- or like accidentally kick-"

Johnny laughed, "We get cockblocked by the universe a lot, this was really our first like attempt at something different."

"Are we boring already? I figured that wouldn't hit for at least another

decade."

"We strive to be boring and aren't. Not many people want to be boring as badly as us," Johnny said kissing the back of his neck. "Done."

Daniel turned. "With you, I'm never going to be bored."

"You are most definitely going to get bored."

"Nope, because sometimes I just like looking at you. Like this," Daniel said gently cupping the side of Johnny's face. "You missed a spot shaving, you never do, but we've been busy and it's golden," Daniel said running his thumb across Johnny's cheek, over the spot. "It's the smallest spot the I doubt anyone noticed, I hadn't until right now."

"That's embarrassing not something that gets rid of boredom you weirdo."

"Have you throught about growing your beard out?"

"No. I mean, if I didn't see anyone, if I was alone, I might stop shaving, but-" he shrugged. "People usually also don't like kissing you with scruff."

Daniel kissed him gently. "I'll kiss you no matter what."

"Do you want me to let it grow out?"

"I'm not saying that, I just think you should know, you can do what you want," Daniel said.

He carefully climbed out of Johnny's lap and around behind him taking the first aid kit from him.

"Whatever you think looks good, whatever you want to look like, it's your choice for you. Like I know you want to get your hair cut, but I also like this, short, long, I like it both," Daniel said running his fingers through Johnny's hair, pushing it forward and away from his red back.

Little spots were bleeding. He opened up the first aid kit.

He felt bad. It'd been his idea. He kind of liked the scratch marks on his own back but this, this was different, this was from rubbing up against a wall. A friction burn.

He rubbed ointment over his back

"I'm sorry. I didn't think that this would happen. Are you going to be able to sleep tonight?"

"Yeah, I'll just have to sleep on my side."

"You sure?"

"Yeah of course. It honestly doesn't hurt too bad."

"Your bar for what actually hurts is too high. I can't even reach it on a ladder," Daniel said with a frown.

"I'm lowering it. Just you wait, by the time we're sixty I'll complain about everything."

"Somehow I doubt that, and seriously, sixty? Start complaining now."

Johnny bowed his head, he spoke so softly that Daniel barely heard him. "I'll try."

Daniel nodded. "Alright, all done. What do you want to do now? Are you going to read?"

Johnny turned to Daniel, an eyebrow raised. "There's something hidden in your tone."

"What? Me? Never," Daniel said fake innocence dripping from his voice, unable to get the smile off his face.

"We hurt ourselves and what, you're still-listen with both of our backs hurt, problem-solve that one will you?" Johnny said. "I'm going to read. Tell me when you come up with something where we don't have to re-do this. Or like if you want to play Uno or something."

Daniel watched Johnny lean over and grab his book off his nightstand and flick it open and Daniel sat staring at him. How easily he settled into reading his book, legs crossed, fingers gently slipping between pages. Ah, he had an idea similar to this. Everything else he was worried about hitting Johnny's back or bumping into it. Not everything but a lot of it.

Daniel laid on his side, draping himself over and into Johnny's lap. Johnny had said to tell him, but could he just move the towel a little? Get rid of it?

"What are you doing?"

"Go back to reading your book."

"Daniel."

"Just relax. Enjoy your book."

"Are-"

"Maybe read to me?"

"What?"

"Read me a story while I have fun."

"Have fun...seriously? This is not a sexy book."

"What are you reading?"

"A horror novel."

"Oh, then grab something else. Grab our book."

Johnny stared down at him and Daniel did his best to give him his most stubborn look. He was going to give this a try. And it would not work if Johnny was reading some horror novel.

"You want me to read you *Pride and Prejudice* again?"

"Yes."

He liked that idea. He'd been thinking any book would do. But that was their book. He liked that one. And he wouldn't mind hearing it again. And Johnny liked it.

One bad idea had to be evened out with a great one. And this was a great one.

Johnny got up, putting his book back on the bedside table and wandering over to the bookshelf on his side of the room, looking over the books.

If his back wasn't red, a reminder, then it'd be the perfect view. It was still a good view.

He kind of understood why so many old paintings were just naked people existing. It was intimate and comfortable and a chance to exist in that space. He could understand wanting to capture that feeling on

canvas.

Johnny got the book and returned to the bed, looking at Daniel with an expression of confused amusement.

"Think of it as a challenge," Daniel said.

"Another one?"

"Yes."

"Why me?"

"I'm not going to do this with someone else."

"I mean why is your idea, what a blow job while I read?"

"Yes. Exactly. I want to see if you can keep reading."

Johnny flushed red.

"I'll get started when you get started," Daniel said gently curling up on his side into Johnny's lap, trying to find a comfortable position, deciding to hook his other arm around Johnny's waist.

"Where do you want me to start?"

Daniel frowned and looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"Well we've already read this, I could start in another spot."

Daniel thought about it, thought about skipping past all the spots that confused him the first time, but now he knew, he knew the characters and the story and it might be nice to meet them again, not confused by school work or trying to get Johnny to relax and let him touch his shoulders and neck, but instead to meet them as old friends from before. Friends whose well worn path he knew but this time he'd take comfort in the journey, enjoy the scenery.

Johnny was blushing a little, not as much as he had when Daniel had proposed the idea.

An experiment was really what it was, a fun way to while away an evening when it was too early to go to bed and too late to go out. A nice challenge, worth drawing out.

"If this is a stamina challenge I feel like you're cheating," Johnny said.

"What? How? How could I possibly be cheating?"

"With your breath," Johnny said flicking the book open, blocking Daniel's view of his face.

It was so pointed, so practically prim and proper that Daniel had to pull away and laugh.

"What?" Johnny asked. "This was your idea."

"Nothing, I've just never seen you...I don't know, gesticulate with a book."

"Helping the guys study for an English exam?"

"We played vocabulary Jeopardy while you were busy. I got five gold stars," Daniel said leaning up, hand on the back of Johnny's neck, brushing his nape with his fingertips and kissing him, cupping the side of his face, brushing his thumb against that missed spot of stubble. "You should teach something. I know I'd pay attention."

Johnny laughed softly. "You wanted it to be a challenge, I'm trying to take this seriously."

"I bet you won't even be able to finish the first chapter."

"We'll see about that," Johnny said. "Though I think you should give me a head start."

"Now how is that fair? Wait how long is the first chapter?"

"That's a question you should've asked before betting on the first chapter," Johnny said showing him the book.

"That's it?" Daniel asked, "That's what two pages?"

"Yup."

Daniel frowned then rested his hand on Johnny's thigh, sliding his fingers up watching as he shivered in response. "Well we'll see."

He ducked his head down, curling up back to where he'd been before, waiting for those words.

"It is a truth universally acknowledged-"

"We'll take care of cleaning up and closing up Mr. Miyagi," Daniel said.

"You sure? Last night," Mr. Miyagi said.

"Of course, we'll come to your place after for dinner okay?" Daniel asked.

Mr. Miyagi nodded gathering his things and heading out to the truck.

Daniel watched him go, switching the sign over to closed and pulling down all the blinds.

Johnny was working on a tree, focused and Daniel cleaned, finished the bookkeeping for the night, tallying their sales and waited for Johnny to finish. Or tried. When he finished his tasks and Johnny hadn't moved he walked over slipping his arms around Johnny's waist looking at the tree he was working on.

"This a particularly difficult one?" Daniel asked.

"No, but it was comissioned so I want to make sure it's perfect."

"Comissioned huh? That's new."

"Yeah a man came in and asked Mr. Miyagi if we did that and he thought we could give it a try. If it works well then we're going to add this to the services. We've done eleven. They have to be identical."

"One guy ordered what tweleve? Oh, I saw that order. I didn't realize it was going to be so much work."

Johnny nodded, turning and twisting to look at Daniel. "But I'm done for the night, done as much as I can for the moment."

"You stuck? Creatively blocked?"

"Just a little, I think from staring at tiny little leaves all day. They're all the same style tree, so there's no real difference," Johnny said leaning against him with a sigh that was almost dramatic.

Daniel laughed. "You know, we're not in a rush to get to Mr. Miyagi's."

"Yeah," Johnny said.

"We don't have to be anywhere at all."

"Right."

"And it's my last night here. I'm just going to be the absent boss."

Johnny laughed at that, amused.

"What are you getting at *boss*?"

"Well you see I've noticed you work really hard, but if you're creatively blocked maybe we should do some sort of stress relief to get you..unblocked," Daniel said dragging a hand down Johnny's chest towards his groin.

"I believe this is an HR violation," Johnny said breathily arching towards his touch.

"That's not a no."

"It's not a no."

"That's a double negative, now I'm confused."

"We're not being strict with our grammar here," Johnny said turning his head and kissing him.

"Good because I start classes next week and don't want to even think about it till then."

Johnny laughed softly. "Then let's think about something else."

"Already ahead of you."

Daniel was trying very hard not to feel guilty because it'd been good and nice and it had been the break Johnny had needed because he'd picked up the bonsai after and finished it, laying naked on the floor next to Daniel on the soft blankets he'd gotten for the shop in case it got too cold, or he saw an opportunity.

It hadn't started on the floor but Daniel liked watching him work, laying on his stomach propped up on an elbow studying the bonsai and finishing it, with renewed focus.

Daniel had run his fingers down his back watching the bonsai take a

new shape, a shape he'd recognized all day but hadn't put two and two together. He hadn't realized that's what it'd been. The big order. He'd been distracted by phone calls.

"I'm going to miss this."

"Me?" Johnny had asked. "Having sex in the shop? Because this is a first."

"The shop. Working with you and Mr. Miyagi. All these little trees. The smell of dirt."

"You can just smell me when you come home."

Daniel rolled onto his back, shifting to rest his head on Johnny's back. "I haven't even been here a year."

"You found what you want to try to do though," Johnny said.

"You don't think my ma is right? That this is a bad idea?"

"No. I think it's good. You got to do what's right for you."

"Even if I'm leaving you?"

Johnny set his tools down and turned to look at Daniel, shifting onto his side. Daniel rolled onto his own side to look at him.

"You're not leaving me though."

"But during the day."

"That's normal though."

"I don't want normal."

"I thought you wanted it desperately."

"I want mundane."

"There's a difference huh?"

"Huge."

Johnny cupped the side of Daniel's face. "I want you to go after what you want. It'd be selfish of me to keep you here in this shop getting miserable. I want you to try what you want, to do what you want, and

I'll see you at home when you get home from classes, from your apprentice ship, your soccer games. I'll come to your games, I'll come to your graduation and I'll cheer you on-"

"In a tiny cheerleaders skirt?" Daniel asked.

Johnny flushed red. "Not in public."

"I'm adding that to the list then because that was not a no."

"I'm trying to-"

"Sorry I've still got sex on the brain."

"You *always* have sex on the brain."

"Not always. But those skirts come up to like here right," Daniel said hand just below Johnny's ass on the back of his thigh. "That's kind of hot."

"I don't know why I bother. You're completely fine. And not all skirts are that short."

"Too bad karate doesn't have cheerleaders," Daniel said thoughtfully.

"No way in hell," Johnny said.

"What?"

"We're not going back to the All-valley. We're skipping next year. Neither of us are competing again."

"You don't think I could sneak in with my youthful looks?" Daniel asked batting his eyes.

"I think they've got a photo of you saying *Daniel LaRusso, too old to compete, don't let him in.*"

"I'm not banned."

"You aren't, but you can't compete."

"I was just thinking having you in a short something would've really distracted from getting beaten up. And it would've been fun after."

"We had fun after."

"But skirts are nice because they're easy access."

"Says the guy who didn't chase skirts."

"Well they are," Daniel said. "Though your shorts sometimes are also evilly short."

"They aren't. Not any worse then yours."

"Oh, you like my shorts huh?"

"I like you in them. Not the actual shorts."

"What's wrong with my shorts?"

"There's no winning this huh? Would you wear a cheerleaders uniform or skirt for me?"

"Huh."

"Huh what?"

"Well, I suppose it'd only be fair. But you're not fighting or competing. You don't have any games. So I don't think I can do a cheerleader's uniform."

"Are you getting out of it via a technicality?"

"No no, I'm just thinking," Daniel said. "I feel like it'd be fair. And I mean it might be fun to dress up. Nurse maybe? But I don't want you getting sick or hurt though I think I am good at nursing you back to health...Halloween?"

"You want to wear a dress for Halloween?" Johnny asked.

Daniel shrugged. "Why not? Anyone bothers me I can kick their ass. Or you can."

Johnny shook his head amused. "Well I was thinking this Halloween we'd join the guys at school. Visit them on campus or something. But you also might have stuff at your school."

"Oh heck yeah. Let's go bother them."

"We usually all match."

"Think they'd be up for dresses or skirts?"

"I've never asked. And it feels weird to recommend it when you are explicitly thinking of sex."

"Well, it's like your robe."

"What about my robe?"

"It's short."

"It's a summer robe. It's LA, it's always hot."

"And you're very hot in it. But again, easy acess. I love it."

"So maybe I'll just wear my robe around and that'll take care of this craving you have. Though it also sounds like you just want me to be naked."

Daniel hummed a thoughtful tone, running his eyes over Johnny's body appreciatvely. "I mean I also greatly enjoy that."

Johnny sighed. "I think you're going to be okay," he said pushing himself up and grabbing his shirt.

"No," Daniel whined.

"What?"

"I'm not done looking."

"Daniel, we can't keep Mr. Miyagi and everyone waiting all evening. We have dinner plans."

Daniel pouted. "One minute."

"You just want to stare at me for a full minute?"

"Yes. That's not long at all."

"It's going to feel like it though."

"Scared it'll turn you on? I'll take responsibility."

"That's what I'm scared of. That we'll keep finding excuses and Mr. Miyagi will worry we got into trouble or something," Johnny said setting his shirt back down and staring at him.

It was haughty almost, like daring him to look.

Daniel wasn't going to back down.

"Us? Trouble? Never," Daniel said eyes leaving Johnny's blue ones and studying him, the way he did his favorite pieces of art. But unlike a museum, he could touch.

"Hey, thought you were just going to look."

"What? Does it cost extra to touch?" Daniel teased.

"I'll put it on your kissing tab."

"Not the kissing tab. I'm already so in debt. Why is it always the kissing tab? Why can't we open another tab? Sex tab? Blow job tab? Can I actually just give you money? Or massages? Can you please subtract by how many times I make you come?"

"No. I'm keeping things all in the kissing debt tab. It'll get confusing otherwise."

Daniel nearly met his gaze but he refused, following well-toned muscles because Johnny was flexing, showing off while being watched and Daniel loved it, every beautiful second.

Daniel sighed. "You know what add it to my tab. It's worth it," he said running his thumb over one of Johnny's nipples and ghosting his fingers down along his sides, over his abs. "You sure you don't want to go again?"

"You got thirty more seconds."

"Damn you're actually timing this? Trying not to get too turned on huh? I bet your sensitive and it wouldn't require much work."

"Daniel, I love you very much but you're going to have to wait till we get home. In case you forgot this is Kumiko's last night. It's not just your last night working here party, it's also Kumiko's going away party."

"Fuck I forgot," Daniel sighed pulling his hand back.

"Otherwise," Johnny said gently. "If we had nothing. Then yes."

"When when we get home then," Daniel said with a sigh. "Okay, yes. We have to see Kumiko before...wait whose taking her to the airport?"

"Chozen is adament he drives. I think Yukie-san is going with."

"So this is it huh? We're not driving her?"

"No. There's not enough room."

"That's kind of a bummer," Daniel said grabbing his own shirt and putting it on.

He carefully picked up the bonsai Johnny had been working on and set it on the shelf, putting on the rest of his clothes and watching Johnny straighten up as well. They finished cleaning up, Daniel grabbing the blanket, folding it up and shoving it in the trunk of the Ford.

It was a familar drive and Daniel wondered if this was the end of a chapter of his life. It would be nice to move on to something new. As much as he loved Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees. As much as he loved working with all the trees and with Johnny and Mr. Miyagi he couldn't help but feel nervous whenever he walked through the door. He felt nervous every time he unlocked the shop in the mornings or was there by himself. He was pretty sure Johnny had noticed. Noticed that he didn't like being there alone. It was why they always carpooled, why if Johnny had plans he'd wait, hover until Mr. Miyagi came in and would leave then. Or why sometimes one of the girls was there when he arrived. Like Johnny had called them to meet Daniel in the morning.

He knew Mike Barnes and his friends weren't going to come around any more. They were in jail. So was Silver. But they'd broken into the shop so many times. They'd beaten him in the shop so many times, jumped him that he didn't feel safe there even though he'd tried desperately to make it feel safer. He didn't unless Johnny or Mr. Miyagi was there. And then that made him feel weak. To be scared. He still felt Silver's gaze, still felt the burn of his hands, his voice in his head if he was alone too long. If he was left to himself he could hear it. Terry Silver's laughter in his head. Could hear the things he told him. A whisper in the wind *Danny-boy*.

He feared what would happen when he'd go to school. Would he freak out like Johnny had that one time in the mountains when a snowball hit his neck? Would he just shut down? He hoped he wouldn't. He worried that Johnny would leave for work and Daniel would just curl up in their bed and be too scared to leave. And he felt awful about that. He felt worthless. He felt unlucky. He felt like he was less than.

But having Johnny beside him, he could breathe. Because he felt safer

with Johnny there and then he felt guilty. Because Johnny had gone through so much staying by his side, and then he felt selfish and weak and it was an awful merry go-round.

He parked the Ford and Johnny was there, suddenly leaning over and kissing him, arm behind him on the back of the seat.

How did he do it? How did he take every awful thing thrown at him and keep going?

Daniel felt like he was held together by fraying twine and about to come apart any second.

Johnny pulled away. "I love you."

Daniel blinked back tears and squeezed his eyes shut kissing Johnny. "Trying to help me out of my kissing debt huh?"

"It will take an eterinity, every little bit helps."

"Every little bit helps is usually what people say when they ask for help paying for something. This is my debt, I'm not going to ask for help paying it. Wait...are you saying you'd let someone else kiss you. *Johnny*!"

Johnny laughed quickly getting out of the car. "Oh no, your debt isn't transferable. It's your responsibility and that's it. Even if someone else kissed me it wouldn't count towards your debt."

"Did someone else kiss you? Give me names."

"My mom did. On the cheek and the forehead," Johnny said.

"I was seriously worried," Daniel said hurrying after him.

Johnny smiled. "You shouldn't get jealous or worried over my mom."

Daniel sighed walking up the steps and taking off his shoes, putting them amongst all the others. There were so many and he paused to look at them all.

"Mr. Miyagi is probably pretty happy."

"Huh?"

"After being alone for so long."

"Yeah," Johnny said adding his shoes neatly to the side and knocking before gently pushing the door open.

"Ah Daniel-san Johnny-san! Start to worry. Think need to send search party. But told to wait. Shop closed? Locked?" Mr. Miyagi asked.

"Yes. And Johnny finished the last comissioned bonsai."

"Oh good!" Mr. Miyagi said smiling at them warmly.

Daniel smiled walking through the familiar halls out into the backyard where everyone was sitting. Kumiko was sitting across from Chozen, talking animatedly to the guys, Jessica and Ali listening.

"I don't want to say goodbye," Daniel whispered.

"It's not goodbye," Johnny said. "Chozen said she's going to come over the winters and host a winter break dance class at the dojo."

"He's going to share the space?"

"Yeah. It sounds like a good idea. Want to take dance lessons with me?"

"I will dance with you any time anywhere."

"Kumiko will be happy to hear that. I'll make sure she knows."

They sat down, welcomed warmly by their friends and Daniel chatted with Kumiko, hearing about her plans in Tokyo, about her long flight, how much of a pain it was to pack and get all the stuff she wanted to take back with her in her suitcase.

"I already said I'll send you snack package," Chozen said shaking his head.

"But that'll take *weeks*," Kumiko said. "I want to take chips and snacks and treats on the plane."

"Oh that's easy," Bobby said. "Here open my going away gift."

He passed over a box. She opened it revealing a bunch of mini cupcakes and cookies.

"That will get you through the flight," he said with a smile.

"Am I going to get one of those too?" Jessica asked.

"I want one too," Ali said.

"We go to the same school Ali, you're not leaving LA," Bobby said with a laugh. "And of course Jessica."

Jessica grinned then turned to Kumiko. "I wish we could come see you perform in Tokyo."

"Me too. But you've got school."

"Boo. I want to transfer. I want to go to LA or be somewhere else."

"Come to Seoul with me," Dutch said. "See if you can study abroad at oh shoot what's the university? Ehwa? See if you can get into Ehwa Women's University in Seoul."

"Shit, I forgot you leave for Seoul in a couple of months."

"Yeah, I might actually get to see Kumiko perform. It's a short flight."

"That's actually a good idea," Jessica said. "Studying abroad in Korea or Japan. Ali, you should do that with me."

"Well I mean, yeah but-"

"Oh it'd be fun!" Jessica said. "We can see Dutch and Kumiko. And then we'll already be there when everyone comes to visit. It'll be an adventure. We could try and climb Mount Fuji!"

Ali laughed, smiling warmly. "Okay, I'll see what my options are and I'll call you once I talk to the guidance counselor. We'll see what they say but it'd be next semester or maybe over the summer. I think it's too late for this semester."

"Good," Dutch said nodding. "You all owe me a visit."

"Don't worry Dutch we'll come see you and you can be tour guide," Jimmy said.

"Sounds like a plan," Johnny said.

Daniel looked at him. He was smiling. Relaxed, happy to be back in the garden, surrounded by their friends.

Daniel put his hand on Johnny's thigh.

Kumiko was smiling, but there was melancholy in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Daniel asked.

The conversation halted and Kumiko turned to look at him, her smile freezing and faltering.

"Being in LA," she said picking up her glass of soda and looking down into it, there were cherries in it. She picked one out by the stem. "It's felt like a dream. A good dream."

"Kumiko-chan," Chozen said softly.

She nodded, then brushed her hair back. "They're all staying, except me. Chozen is going to move into an apartment with the dojo and Sato-san and Aunt Yukie are staying here with Mr. Miyagi." She sniffed brushing at her eyes. "It feels weird that they won't be in Okinawa. Okinawa is our home. Tomi Village is home. But this is better. I'm happy. I'm sad. It's confusing. Like maybe I'll never go back to Tomi village again. Aunt Yukie is thinking of selling the house you know? The one Mr. Miyagi bought her with the winnings? So it's just Miyagi sensei's place and Sato's place, but who will take care of those? But this is so much better. To be here together. But I'm also leaving, and I don't want to."

"Your parents are still in Okinawa," Chozen said. "It's still your home."

Kumiko looked at him with such sadness in her eyes that Daniel didn't understand, wondering if her parents were okay. He'd never gotten a chance to meet them. She reached out and patted Chozen's hand and he looked away, gaze averted. To Daniel's surprise Tommy bumped amicably into Chozen reaching into the middle of the table to grab a pot of tea and pour Chozen some. Chozen bowed his head, lifting the cup with two hands.

Daniel wondered if he lived in the twilight zone.

"We can find you a dance studio in LA," Bobby said. "If you want to stay."

"He's right, there are hundreds," Ali said.

Kumiko shook her head. "I want to but I feel like that's the easy path. I want...no I need to do my own thing. The troupe in Tokyo, that's...important to me. I just wish I could...shrink you all down and take you with me."

"About that," Johnny said opening his bag. He pulled out a

familiar Fotorama.

Daniel remembered in the morning Johnny asking if he could bring it with them. It'd been a good idea.

"It might help if you have some captured memories to take back home with you."

Kumiko smiled, eyes glassy and wet.

"I love that," she said sniffing.

"We'll take lots of photos," Ali said warmly.

"You can tell all your friends in Tokyo who all your handsome American friends are," Dutch said with a grin.

Kumiko laughed and nodded, brushing her eyes.

They took a few photos, trying to figure out the best way to get the lighting right.

Mr. Miyagi, Yukie, and Sato came out with dinner and more drinks, joining them at the table.

They took lots of pictures through the night as they played games, with the guys grinning, arms around one another, Chozen sitting stiffly, face neutral next to Sato and Yukie.

Of Yukie and Mr. Miyagi and Sato.

Of Johnny and Daniel, the girls, and group photos, photos of them learning Koi koi, of Kumiko winning, arms in the air delight on her face. Her third win in a row.

There was a thick stack of photos at the end of the night and she went through them picking out the ones she was taking home, they'd taken multiples so that Yukie could keep a nice photo of the two of them together so that everyone got photos to keep.

Daniel did notice that Chozen got a small stack handed to him by Kumiko and he had a sneaking suspicion that somewhere in that pile was a picture of Johnny by himself. But he was trying to be nice. And maybe he handled it by putting his hand a little too high on Johnny's thigh, shocking Johnny, Daniel felt his muscles tense, the slightest twitch as his fingers grazed his groin. Johnny didn't stop talking to Bobby on his other side, but his response was to take Daniel's hand in

his and hold it very firmly away from his groin. His ears were pink.

Daniel had no good excuse but he grinned, soaking up the night, the atmosphere. The celebration of his last day working at Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees and their goodbye for Kumiko. He was happy.

Johnny was being gentle. Too gentle. Daniel wanted to tell him to hurry up. He wasn't fragile. They could get this show going.

Did Johnny seriously still think he was fragile? After all this time?

Sure...Daniel was gentle with Johnny but that was different. Johnny had a history of people being unkind to him. Of no one taking the time to be gentle with him, kind. So Daniel wanted to make sure *he* was. That Johnny felt safe and loved and that he was precious.

But Daniel didn't need that. He already was made fun of for being weak, picked on ever since he moved to LA...and oh god did he have a complex? Whatever.

He wanted to flip them over and show Johnny that Daniel wasn't going to hurt himself, that he could take it. Show Johnny that he didn't have to be careful, that there wasn't that fear that...was that it? Was Johnny worried that Daniel would freeze up? Worried that once Daniel saw him that, that he might panic?

Hadn't they gotten past that? Hadn't he told Johnny that they were past that? That he'd forgiven him long long ago? Long before they got together? Hadn't he said it a million times?

He hadn't had he?

Damn it.

Why did he always think he told Johnny the things he'd only thought? Because he was always talking. He thought he'd slipped it in there somewhere. He thought with how strongly he'd felt it that Johnny would just pick it up. Like all the times he struggled to sleep while Silver and Barnes were tormenting him. Like the way he just always listened, he'd ended up relying on that rather than saying everything.

But now was a bit awkward right?

He didn't know what to do with himself.

"Is something wrong?" Johnny asked.

Stopping. Of course he was stopping. Why was he stopping?

"No."

"That's the no of a liar."

"Nothing is wrong."

"Lies. If you don't want to, it's fine."

Why was he like this?

"I can't read your mind," Johnny said. "But you're quiet. Too quiet. You're almost never this quiet unless you're deep in thought but you're also not relaxing. At all."

"I'm not fragile."

"You're not," Johnny agreed, shifting and laying down beside him, laying on his side and towards Daniel.

"Then why are you going so slow?"

"Because someone's made sure I'm very aware that it could hurt."

"That's for you!"

Johnny laughed. "I think that's supposed to be for everyone."

"We've gotten nowhere."

"I don't know about that."

"Oh come on, you haven't even..."

Johnny smiled shaking his head. "You say the crudest things, the dirtiest thoughts you have when you are-"

"Got it," Daniel said sitting up quickly.

"Got it?"

"Maybe I just got to do it?"

"Daniel, it's okay we don't have to."

"What? But I want to have sex."

Johnny pushed himself up. "I want you to listen to me okay?"

"But-"

"*Daniel.*"

"Fine."

"You aren't fragile. You're a bad ass. You're the one who defeated me at the All Valley. You got up every time. You defeated Barnes. You're the one Chozen chose to fight-"

"Because I wouldn't kill him and he didn't want to hurt *you*."

"Still, he knew you'd give it your all. I'm sorry that I started that snowball of people fighting you."

"Is this because of that?" Daniel asked.

"Huh?"

"Are you going so slow because you still feel guilty?"

"I may always feel guilty but Daniel that's not-"

"I forgave you a long time ago you know. Before we started dating. Somewhere around New York, earlier actually now that I think about it. I thought I'd told you but I realized I just felt it so strongly and I didn't actually tell you. Just like I thought I'd told you I liked you back but hadn't in Okinawa. You just can read me so well most of the time that I forget you can't actually read my mind."

Johnny kissed him, a deep passionate kiss that left Daniel breathless. That was better. That was what he wanted. More of that. Then Johnny pulled away. No. Noooo. Come back. More.

"It's not that Daniel. I mean I'm still working on that. You've forgiven me, but *I* haven't forgiven me. But I'm working on it."

"*Johnny*."

How could he not forgive himself? After everything he'd done to make up for it. After all he'd been through. It didn't seem fair.

"You aren't fragile to me. I know you can handle yourself. But, to me you're precious. I love you. You can ask me to hurry up all you want, but if you aren't relaxed we're not doing anything. Because you're not comfortable, you're not ready and that's fine. I don't mind. I enjoy...what we do," Johnny said looking away face red. "You..." he turned back to look at Daniel, taking his hand and bring it to his chest. Not where Daniel wanted to put his hand. "Being with you, whatever we're doing, makes me happy. I like how you meet my gaze from across the room, I like that you can't keep your hands to yourself. I like listening to you talk. It's all **grounding**. I like watching you do kata in the living room. I like dancing with you. I like that you pull me in to dance. I...*I like my life* and that's not something I ever expected to say and it's because of you. I wouldn't change anything because you're here. You were the catalyst, falling in love with you is the best thing that ever happened to me. Which is why I am not going to rush you, why I'm not going to keep going if you're not relaxed or into it, not because you're- what did you say? Weak? Definitely not. You are *not* that, it's not even on my list of synonyms with Daniel LaRusso. But because you're precious and you've also told me like a thousand times that rushing and pushing through when you're not relaxed is bad. So you can blame yourself for being a good teacher." He got a mischievous glint in his eye. "*Sensei*."

Daniel laughed, a watery laugh. Somewhere along the way he'd built himself a wall and hadn't realized it. He refused to relax because of all the people who just one after another came after him. He couldn't let down his guard because every time he tried he got hurt. But Johnny wasn't going to hurt him. And he knew that. He just...didn't know how to tell his body that. To get his mind to relax, to calm down.

He liked coming home from his night classes and seeing Johnny curled up on the couch with a book. He liked how Johnny always slowly dragged his eyes from the page to tell him *welcome home*. How Johnny felt like home. It was the thing he'd always wanted. He'd spent time building a foundation telling himself it was for Johnny, but it was for himself. He'd needed something sturdy under his feet that wouldn't shift or crack. He needed something steady to hold on to and Johnny was that. He had a strong hand to hold onto, something stronger than every other hand he'd held.

Somewhere along the way everything had gotten twisted up. Because he had wanted this, had expected this from the start, thought it'd be the opposite, thought he'd have to butter Johnny up to get between his legs. He'd thought that would be a rare treat, not his favorite constant indulgence. He'd never thought he'd be the one getting stuck

and hung up. He'd tried to do it himself once or twice and Johnny had...the one time when he'd found out about the magazines but now...

It was like he'd put his guard up and couldn't figure out how to put it down. Which felt silly because there wasn't any danger. Not anymore. Terry Silver, John Kreese and Mike Barnes were in jail. Jimmy had given him the ruling in a fancy box over a nice dinner at some family restaurant with some champagne they snuck. He'd also given him the check. A ridiculous check. Daniel hadn't known what to do with it. He didn't want it. Even though it felt wrong to throw it out.

Jimmy had explained that he could do whatever he wanted with it. But it was understandable that he didn't want it. That happened. But money was money and it was his. He still didn't know what to do with it. It felt cursed. Like the ghost of the man was around the corner, waiting.

He'd told Daniel that he'd already gotten Daniel to do what he wanted, that it'd been so easy to do and Daniel didn't trust himself, didn't trust people.

He didn't trust that Silver wouldn't get out and come looking for Daniel first thing. When he was alone he feared the footsteps behind him, he walked fast past alleyways, he feared hearing that laugh, that voice. He didn't know how Johnny handled that fear.

He didn't want the money, didn't want to use it or touch it. In case he came back. In case he said something he'd throw it back at him. But it was also his. As the one who suffered the abuse, the stalking, the torment. Things he didn't think of for himself that made him feel weak, he wasn't weak. He wanted people to just believe him. He wished he could be as cool about it as Laura. That he could just burn something big and vast and then move past it.

They probably weren't going to have sex tonight. And that was a disappointment. Made him feel worse.

"It's not like I don't know how it's supposed to go," Johnny said pulling Daniel into a hug, running his fingers down Daniel's back. "I mean I've gotten past this point before."

Daniel sighed pressing his cheek against Johnny's pec. He wanted to bite it. But Johnny would let go of him then. Would yelp and fly away. Maybe if he was gentle. He bet it was like the mochi Mr. Miyagi

gave him, he'd have to ask for more to keep from biting Johnny. Daniel was gentle, just letting his teeth graze Johnny's chest.

"You've just completely moved on. You sometimes have the oddest coping mechanisms. Like Daniel you- seriously? Fine if you're going to be like that- for someone who manhandles it a lot, are you just scared of my dick?"

Manhandles? Daniel bit down a little harder than he meant to, but not too hard and shot Johnny a glare. It wilted immediately.

Johnny wasn't being mean, he was trying something new, a gentle ribbing to get Daniel to relax.

"It's not you," Daniel said softly. "Just somewhere along the way I think...I backed myself into a corner and put walls up. I thought this was how things would always go you know? That I'd have to work harder to get you under me. I wasn't expecting to one day to..."

"You've been through a lot," Johnny said.

"So have you!"

"You've had a rough couple of years, and this last one was pretty brutual. You're allowed to feel upset or uncomfortable or just not up for certain things."

"But you're fine with it," Daniel mumbled into Johnny's chest.

Johnny shrugged. "I had support, even if I didn't see it. A nosy beautiful Italian who wouldn't leave me alone and who kept checking in on me. I think if we'd met earlier you probably would've joined the guys in their guard routine. I'd probably never get a night to myself."

"If we met earlier I like to think I would've gone for you instead of Ali."

Johnny laughed. "No fear huh?"

"Of the big buff beautiful blonde? I wasn't scared of you pretty much ever. It was more of the group that constantly beat me up. I mean you on your own were...Johnny you did a spinning kick to close a locker door and looked like you were going to cry when I ruined your sweater."

"I *wasn't* going to cry."

Daniel smiled kissing the tip of his nose. "Now that time I was pissed, but I also got to touch your pec, so you know, that was nice. If you'd shown up to the beach and gone for a swim earlier and not shown up to try and talk to Ali? I think I'd have just stared and then started flirting before I even knew what I was doing."

"What are you going to do when I'm no longer buff?"

"Squeeze everything I can get my hands on," Daniel said.

"Seriously?" Johnny said it in a way like he hadn't expected Daniel to have such a quick answer. His face was red.

"Yup," Daniel said pressing his finger into Johnny's pec. "You still work out even though you don't have to anymore. You lift stuff all the time for the shop, you do who knows what at the animal sanctuary and with the kids, and you do kata with me. It's going to be a while before that happens, but I know I'm still going to be obssessed and *manhandling* you as much as I can."

He smiled at Johnny's stunned red face and kissed him. He liked thinking about their future. He wanted a nice house in Encino hills. With a pool and their own dojo and a nice garden. He wanted to cook in the kitchen, make love in the kitchen, every room of the house, in the privacy of their garden, by the pool. They might not get there though if he didn't relax.

Johnny's hand was in his hair, a soothing motion of fingers along his scalp, down the back of his neck and spine then back up.

"I think...everything fucked me up more than I thought," Daniel whispered. "Which is weird, you...you were constantly...and I...I can't handle being manipulated by...I can't bounce back from that? You nearly died, and I..."

"Apples and oranges."

"Huh?"

"You can't compare them. We're different. You know when you dropped me off at that place while you sat in the café and looked over the paperwork for the shop?"

Daniel nodded.

"They wanted to know everything. But they were nice about it. I was

given books and had a lot of...difficult conversations. It was helpful. But I thought *this is nothing, everything I went through, it's nothing compared to Daniel. Like Daniel survived a fight to the death and the death of his father and Mr. Miyagi's...what I'm dealing with isn't that bad.* And they told me, trauma is trauma, your hurt is still hurt, it hurts *you*. Sure, people are going through awful terrible things out in the world, even people you know, but it doesn't take away from what you feel and it doesn't make that lesser. A child who lives an idyllic life is still going to cry when they get stung by a bee. Because it *hurts*. And we're not going to go up to them and yell at them and say why are you crying? There's a kid whose parents are gone. Everyone's hurting and it's different because people are different and how they handle it is different.

"Silver was an asshole and he hurt you, and so did Chozen, and so did Barnes and his friends, and so did the guys, and so did I. And you are still healing from all of that and all the changes and difficulties in your life. Your mother leaving while we were in Okinawa? That was rough. You lost your home. Losing your home fucking sucks. Your dad died. That's going to be with you forever. You watched Mr. Miyagi go through the same damn thing and I'm sure that reopened that wound. Your uncle is sick. You're starting a new chapter of your life without any of us there by your side. You're allowed to feel hurt, betrayed, angry, or sad, or a confusing combination of everything and you're allowed to take your time. You'll have good days and bad days. It's one of the few things that isn't a competition and never will be. It's a process. There's no quick fix and it takes time, heck, I didn't even really start to like myself again until Okinawa."

Daniel looked at him, vision blurred.

"If it hadn't fucked you up in some way then you'd be inhuman," Johnny said.

Daniel laughed, rubbing at his eyes. "I want you to fuck me up though."

"You say that but-"

"I know, I know," Daniel sighed. "Mood is completely gone."

"Always a shocker," Johnny said smiling at him. "Very few things kill your mood."

Daniel buried his face back in Johnny's chest, listening to him breathe, to his heart beat. It was kind of new to be nude and not having sex or

cuddling after. To not be sated but just comfortable.

"I want to do something cool," Daniel thought about not saying the rest of it but decide the mood was already super dead so why not. "I want *you* to think I'm cool."

Johnny laughed a short snort of a laugh. "I already think your cool."

Daniel frowned.

Johnny had said that. Several times. It wasn't that. He wasn't sure exactly what it was, so he was going to try and figure it out the best way he could, by talking.

"I want to be the kind of cool I think you would think would be cool."

"Okay...you lost me."

Daniel sat up trying to figure out how to say it. "Ali said she didn't want to be the girl on the back of a cool guys motorcycle and said maybe that was something I wanted, but really I wanted to drive your motorcycle."

"I mean you can if you want," Johnny said brow furrowed trying to follow along.

Daniel sighed. "You...I am always getting into fights."

"Not always."

"Right, not always, but ever since I moved to LA I get into more fights than I used to. And like in Newark I didn't get into fights pretty much ever. But if someone picked a fight with me I'd be down to fight. Just with all my family around it never reached that point so I was more of a class clown. But I wanted to be the cool guy who won fights and rescued the person they liked. Like the hero on a movie or comic book cover you know? And you, that's all easy. You fit that very easy. I want to save you. Every time I try I...fail."

"You want me to get into danger so you can rescue me?" Johnny asked.

"No, I don't want you to be in danger I just..."

"You fought a death match for me."

"That Chozen had no intention of winning and didn't even hurt you.

He never would on purpose. But like Kreese attacked you twice and I didn't...I didn't save you either time."

"Well Mr. Miyagi saved me the first time and I saved myself the second time."

"I've regretted walking away the first time ever since," Daniel whispered twisting the blanket in his lap feeling the lump in his throat, the burn in his eyes. "I saw Kreese attack you, I saw the whole fight. I walked out, everyone was congratulating me and I signed autographs, *me*, I felt great and then Kreese tried to kill you and I froze. I want to think I would've stepped in, I want to think I would've helped you, I wish I had, I desperately wish I'd gone with Mr. Miyagi, that I'd at the very very least gone to help you up afterwards, but instead I went out for lobster with Ma, Ali and Mr. Miyagi and I tried not to think about it. And I didn't think about it that much. And I regret that. I felt guilty all night, awful. It was callous. I didn't worry about you I-"

"Daniel," Johnny said softly rubbing his back.

"And then it was really the guys who saved you from Sid. I didn't even-I didn't even chew him out or yell at him. I wanted to punch him in the face and I should've."

"He would've sued you into the ground for battery."

"But he deserves it!" Daniel had tears in his eyes but he was pissed. Pissed at the universe, at himself. "And then I brought Kreese back into our lives, I opened that door. I met with Silver, I fell for his lies, I let him talk me into hurting myself. I only fight now when I'm cornered and there's no other choice and I never move fast enough to save you or help you or anything. Everyone targets me because they know right? That I freeze up? That I'm weak? Why do I always freeze up. Hell I froze up now and that was with you. What's wrong with me? Why is it always me? Why can't I be the hero?"

Daniel rubbed at his eyes, it was the same thing that'd been bothering him for a long time. All compounded. Regret, guilt, failure, pain.

"You saved Yuna."

Daniel blinked looking at him. "Anyone would've-"

"I couldn't," Johnny said. "And you didn't even think about it, you just climbed up a pole, stopped the entire thing from catching on fire or

electrocuting the two of you and you got her back down safely. She wouldn't be alive to send us art now if not for you."

"But you-I walked away from *you*. I hate myself for walking away from you. You were having such a rough-such a bad time. And then you came to apologize and I-I could see your throat and I got scared but it wasn't just because you were where I wasn't expecting you but because I was faced with my own cowardice. Your neck was all red still and that was, I could've at least *tried*. And then you kept trying to help and I didn't feel like I deserved your help. I didn't want it because I hadn't helped you. I...you keep helping, showing up, saving me or backing me up. But I didn't, not when I should've, I could've-" He turned to look at Johnny, the thing he'd told himself thousands of times but hadn't said out loud, "I'm sorry for walking away. I owe you a rescue."

Johnny grabbed one of the blankets on their bed, wrapping it around Daniel's shoulders and pulling him close.

"I never expected your help in that moment, I didn't expect anyone's help. I thought it was...in that moment, me getting my just desserts. That Sid had foretold my death because he'd warned me about talking back."

Daniel wrapped his arms around Johnny's waist, turning into him and hugging him as tightly as he could. "Every person who came after me went after you and I didn't stop a single one of them. I didn't save you. I know Chozen didn't mean to, but he still hurt your arm and knocked you out, kept bothering you, stole your jacket. Silver sent Barnes and his goons after you and Kreese went after you again. And I walked away from you twice."

"Twice?" Johnny asked.

"When I got jealous and didn't listen to you, I drove off after I found out you'd apologized to Ali for kissing her."

"Oh, right. You do know I apologized to her not because you kissed me and that made me think of it right? That I liked you a lot back then. I just wanted to kiss you when you weren't drunk."

Daniel nodded with a soft smile. "I think it's because you get kiss drunk."

"Kiss drunk?" Johnny asked.

"Your brain stops working a bit. If someone's drunk then *you* can't get kiss drunk."

"My brain does not stop working."

"Not always true," Daniel said thoughtfully. "But sometimes you get this kind of hazy look in your eyes. You lose focus."

Johnny blushed lightly looking away. "It's because I like kissing you."

"Clearly since you picked the most ridiculous number of kisses to put me in debt," Daniel said with a soft laugh pressing a soft kiss into Johnny's neck.

His skin was warm and soft. Daniel wanted to touch him, but in a lazy way, without any goal. But that'd be cruel. Right? Just touch and feel and focus on skin. He still didn't feel good or even really okay. But he liked touching Johnny and he felt like maybe that'd make him feel just a little better. But maybe that was procrastinating, avoidance, avoiding everything that felt wrong and broken inside of himself.

Johnny's hand was on the back of his neck, his shoulders, massaging at his skin. "Next time I'll call you okay?"

"Huh?" Daniel asked.

"Next time someone tries to fight me I'll run into a phone booth, shut the door and call you. You can come fight them."

Daniel laughed at the image.

"You better."

Johnny gently set his chin on Daniel's shoulder, arms going around him again. "I never expected you to come help me in that parking lot. I didn't expect anyone too. I might've also not handled your help in a good way. I mean I ran away from the guys. Just slipped out when they weren't paying attention. I was pretty shaken up, my mom calmed me down, made things more...clear."

"See? Even your mom does more than I do."

"She's my mom," Johnny said with a laugh. "It's her job."

"I want that job."

"Gross, no."

"Not like *that*. I want to be...I want to be someone I'm proud of, that Mr. Miyagi is proud of and I'm just not there yet."

"Mr. Miyagi is really proud of you," Johnny said .

"I fuck up all the time though, especially lately."

"It's really hard to focus anger into something calming like Mr. Miyagi wants," Johnny said gently. "And you're like the fiestiest person I've ever met, even more so than...Ali was, is. Because of that, it's hard to just go with the flow like Mr. Miyagi wants. But here's the thing, he loves you, he's proud of you, he doesn't expect you to be perfect. You expect you to be perfect. No one else does."

Daniel frowned. That was it. He turned and tilted his head back to look at Johnny.

Johnny kissed his forehead. "You're too hard on yourself. You put all these expectations on yourself. And you're upset that you haven't bounced back from being manipulated and hurt? It takes time. That ended only like a month ago? A few months? You gotta give yourself time and be prepared that there still might be bad days. I have bad days. I have bad mornings, bad nights."

Daniel knew he did, knew that sometimes but less often then he used to Johnny would have nightmares, or would get up in the middle of the night. Sometimes Daniel could catch him in the midst of a nightmare and help, but sometimes when he woke in the middle of the night he'd find Johnny in the living room reading. Daniel would come out and lay down on top of him bringing a blanket from their bed and they'd fall asleep there.

There'd been a couple mornings where they woke up with their friends staring down at them.

It didn't happen often but usually Daniel would hear them talking softly and would glare at them with everything he could because they always came so damn early.

But they seemed to get it, that if they were out in the living room Johnny hadn't slept well. The book in his hand usually was pretty obvious. At Mr. Miyagi's Daniel would find Johnny sitting out in the garden, would wrap a blanket around himself and lean against him, throwing half of it around Johnny's otherside. He shifted, leaning against Johnny curled up in his arms.

"What do you want to do for Valentine's Day?" Johnny asked after a while.

"Huh? I guess a quiet dinner at home and sex."

"So a regular night?" Johnny asked with a laugh.

Daniel tilted his head to look up at him. The thought of moving dozens and dozens of boquets sounded exhausting which is what he expected if he didn't say anything. "Yes, I don't want to do anything big. But...I know you like big things, do you have some idea of what you want to do?"

Johnny ran his fingers along Daniel's arm thoughtfully. "Can I make dinner?"

Daniel blinked. He sounded so...tentative. Like he was shy about cooking even though he had cooked before. He'd made Daniel all sorts of Japanese dishes and Okinawan dishes and was now learning with him mom and Abuela so maybe he had some Mexican dish he wanted to try? Or maybe Yukie had taught him something new he wanted to make but was nervous about.

Daniel pushed himself up a little and kissed Johnny's chin.

"Sure. But in exchange, don't get me any flowers," Daniel said settling back down.

Johnny looked down at him in surprise.

"If you're cooking then I'm buying you flowers," Daniel said drumming his fingers on Johnny's legs. That was going to be the best way to avoid drowning in flowers. Plus he liked that idea.

Johnny wrapped his arms around him, pulling him close to his chest.

There was a shop near campus, he could get them after his classes were over, but he'd have to put the order in asap, he assumed Valentine's Day was going to be pure chaos.

As the weeks passed Daniel got used to his schedule. He got used to going to school, to the drive, to the layout of the campus and the his classed. He learned his classmates names, not all of them but more than he'd thought he would at the beginning of the semester.

As February rolled around Daniel went to the flower shop on campus as soon as he could. The woman sitting at the desk looked bored and uninterested, flipping through a magazine.

"Hello," Daniel said.

"Hello, here to put in an order for Valentine's Day?" she asked picking up a pencil and holding it over a notebook.

"Yes."

"How many roses?"

"Oh, no roses."

"So the cheaper carnations?"

"Uh no actually my partner knows floriography. I want to get him something he can enjoy."

She sent the pencil down, looking up at him. "Oh," she grabbed another piece of paper and a pencil. "What do you want the bouquet to say?"

"I want it to be romantic," Daniel said shifting a little awkwardly, "And sweet, and sexy."

"Do you have any flowers you want to be in it?"

"I don't know."

Daniel had meant to go through Johnny's book that morning to get some ideas, but Johnny had been wearing his robe and it was just so easy to grab the edges of it and pull Johnny close and into a deep warm kiss and he'd lost track of time. Johnny had pulled away first quickly giving him a final kiss before running off to get dressed and then out the door.

Daniel was willing to bet that Johnny had taken the stairs instead of the elevator, running so he wouldn't be late to the shop where Mr. Miyagi was expecting him. Daniel had leaned against the counter dazed before realizing he too was in danger of losing the time he'd allotted to put in his request for flowers at the shop before his classes started.

She nodded. "How about pink and red Alstroemeria, lilac but in

magenta, and iris?" she asked turning to grab a binder off a shelf and flipping it open, pushing it across towards him. "Alstroemeria in pink is a playful love, red is passionate, they're tiny lilies, there's also a bit of devotion in their meaning too. Lilac is usually thought of in purple," she said flipping the page to a purple and pink flower made up of a whole bunch of tiny flowers, "But I have a supplier who does magenta and while Valentine's Day is a romantic holiday no one usually goes for it so I should be able to get some in time, it's a stronger type of love, plus they smell amazing. And then there's iris which are purple and hold a whole lot of meanings but would tie the color scheme together quite nicely I think. I'd also add some greenery. I could do ivy which is affection, fidelity and friendship, Maybe some sorrrel or spearmint and fern." she said thoughtful.

"It sounds nice," Daniel said nodding.

"Okay, this should be fun, what time can you pick it up?"

"I get out of class around 5 pm on Valentine's Day, can I pick it up then?"

"Yes. I'll set it aside. I'll need a name because I'll have staff helping me then because it's going to be packed."

"Totally understandable."

"Valentine's Day and Mother's Day I am always flooded by last minute customers. So you'll tell the staff your name and they'll hand it over."

"Daniel LaRusso." Daniel said leaning over and watching her pencil out his name hovering over the La, "Russo, R-u-s-s-o."

"Got it, it'll be ready in time. If you can come by let's say tomorrow or Wednesday I can give you how much it'll cost then, I have to check with my supplier first. And then on Friday you can just pick it up."

"Thank you," Daniel said. "I'll swing by then."

The week went by fast. Soccer practice and classes, his apprenticeship at the mechanic, all ate up his time and before he knew it he was pushing his chair back from his final class, his classmates buzzing around him.

"Daniel, we're going to the bar, they have this special for single people

on Valentine's day, you bring enough friends you get free shots. They won't card you if you start talking mechanics like you did last time. The bartender totally thought you were a middle school student until they started listening to you."

"I've actually got plans."

"You've got a date?"

"I do."

"How'd you manage that?"

"It's the convertible," another classmate said. "It's a really cool car."

"It's *yellow* though, come on man you gotta paint it something else. Like *anything* else would be cooler."

"I like my yellow Ford," Daniel said putting his stuff away.

"He's also doing soccer and learning mechanical engineering in his free time, plenty of girls would go after that."

"True. Actually Daniel, if your date doesn't work out I might have a couple girls I could set you up with."

"I don't think he's going to need it, did you see the girls bringing him chocolate this week?"

"Shit right, well if it doesn't work out let us know."

"Nah, his date's going to snap him up tonight."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Dude's going to be all cool rich and professional when he graduates. It's like what those snobby investment guys are always talking about. Getting in on the action at the ground floor."

They laughed and Daniel shook his head fondly.

"Still on for next week though?" one classmate asked.

"The study group?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah."

"I can still make that."

"Thank goodness. Well we won't keep you from your date, hope it goes well."

"Hope you get laid."

There was laughter, good humor, and he knew they were going to go to the same bar they always went to, full of other college students and they'd drink cheap beer and shots and they'd flirt with girls and complain about missing out on getting chocolate from girls like they used to. If Daniel went he'd share the ones he'd gotten from classmates who he had to turn down. Had to tell them he appreciated it but he couldn't accept, and they said "As friends then, enjoy the chocolate."

He didn't feel like he was going to miss out. He'd made chocolates at his mom's house, and he was going to pick up flowers and then he was going home to Johnny.

He could've told them. He could've corrected them. But he liked being just Daniel. He liked being just a classmate who had a date. Who had plans. He liked being a friendly mystery. He liked keeping his life separate. He liked how he felt at school and at his soccer club. He liked listening to his classmates mundane issues. Like when was it to early to move in with their girlfriends/boyfriends and having no good advice because he'd pretty much moved in before they started really dating. He counted Okinawa. But he liked nodding sagely, to hear other people's issues that were so easy. He wanted that. To worry about what color to paint the living room or what to have for dinner.

But tonight was different. He wasn't worrying about a date or feeling the weight of lonliness while surrounded by pink and reds and couples being annoying. He got to go home and just spend time with Johnny. They weren't going out. They weren't doing anything fancy because they'd agreed. And it was low stakes and lovely.

Daniel stopped by the flower shop to pick up his boquet, telling one of the harried staff members his name, and collecting his boquet. It was as pretty and different then everyone elses and he felt like he'd done good. Tried something different and Johnny was going to like it.

The way home was long, not because it was longer than any other day but because he wanted to be home.

He wanted to see what Johnny was making.

He expected fish. Maybe he and Mr. Miyagi had gone fishing. Maybe they'd agreed, some cute idea of cooking for the people in their lives with fish they'd caught. Daniel expected Mr. Miyagi to cook for Yukie and Sato. And Chozen, belatedly, awkwardly at their table now that Kumiko was back in Tokyo. She was probably going on dates in Tokyo after dance class. Probably giving out chocolates and she'd get flooded with more on White day.

Daniel probably would find something weird at home when he got home. Something Chozen sent. It'd be for the both of them, that's what Johnny would say but it'd be really for Johnny and then Yukie would remind them about white day and they'd have to get Chozen something out of politeness.

Daniel curled his fingers around the steering wheel a little too tightly then sighed, shaking his head. It wasn't worth the energy.

Chozen was lonely. It was fine to every once in awhile get a gift from him because Daniel already won, he already had Johnny.

Jessica said she was sending something too. For everyone. She'd mentioned it in their last call. So he had to stop by the front desk and see if anything had arrived. There might also be stuff from their Moms. They were doing a fancy tea time and then going out for drinks. Which was something also worth worrying about. Mostly because the last time they'd had a drunken outing Daniel had been needled by his mother later about when they were moving into a house, if there were discussing the future. A very drunken reminder that even though Daniel was in a relationship with Johnny didn't mean she didn't still expect grandchildren. Somehow. And Daniel had nearly hung up on her.

They had enough going on. He wanted to enjoy being two. Just Johnny and him. Besides, next time his mom called he'd reminder that technically he already had adopted 4 cobras, three girls and reluctantly Chozen. He couldn't take on any more.

He parked and gathered up his things, lifting up the boquet as carefully as possible. He'd learned while moving 19 birthday boquets that they were fragile, part of their charm he supposed.

He double checked that he had everything and then headed to the front desk, carefully setting the flowers down to take the box the security guard had for him. Balancing it all carefully he headed to the elevator and up to their room.

It'd worked up to this point without squashing the flowers or having to set anything down, but now he had to figure out how to open the door. He didn't want to set it all down. He'd wanted to make a grand enterance but he thumped his head against the door with a sigh trying to figure out the best way to dig out his keys without having to set everything down and possibly squishing the flowers.

The door opened and Daniel stumbled forward, glancing up to see Johnny looking bemused.

"Ah, wait, don't look," Daniel said curling himself over the flowers.

"Well now I want to look."

"Let me put everything down and then give these to you properly," Daniel said.

"Okay," Johnny said stepping back with the door and holding it open for him to come in and take off his shoes, staring up at the ceiling.

"Still don't look," Daniel said quickly kissing his cheek and hurrying past to set the package from Jessica on the coffee table.

He carefully picked up the boquet.

Johnny had shut the door, locking it and wasn't moving.

"Okay, you can look," Daniel said holding out the boquet.

Johnny turned and crossed the distance between them kissing Daniel who quickly held the boquet out of the way.

"Welcome home," Johnny said.

"Don't crush the flowers!" Daniel said. "Get a guy flowers and he kisses you instead of paying any attention to all the hard work you did."

"Okay okay, let me see them," Johnny laughed carefully taking the flowers from him.

Daniel watched him study the boquet, looking at each of the flowers, engrossed the way he was when he was reading. It was cute and also nerve wracking. Like what if the lady at the shop had gotten it wrong? What if she'd stuck something in there that meant something bad? Daniel wished he had Johnny's book to look it over, to compare, cross reference, that maybe he should've done that first.

How long could a guy spend looking at a boquet?

Daniel shifted, feeling his palms sweat.

Why was he so nervous? It was a boquet. Should he have gotten roses instead? Or carnations? Buried Johnny in flowers the way Daniel feared he'd be one day if he let Johnny do as he pleased.

"I'm going to put these in water," Johnny said.

That was it? That was the response Daniel got for getting Johnny flowers? Who gave the guy flowers other than his Mom? He doubted anyone had.

He'd expected tears.

He'd expected *something*.

Anything.

Daniel sunk down onto the couch and opened the box from Jessica.

The welcome home kiss had been a better response. He pulled out a strange doll that he set on the coffee table with a frown, staring at it. It was terrifying. Brutus was written on it's striped chest. He pulled out a heart shaped box and laughed opening it. Buckeyes. All of it was buckeyes. There was a note, her university mascot was also a buckeye named Brutus. He was going to have to find the most creepy mascot he could to send her back. He wondered what the local mascots were. He'd have to ask around.

He caught movement out of his pariphial and looked up. Johnny was leaning over him, fingers gently under his chin, lifting his chin up, other hand was leaning on the other side of the couch, blue eyes dark. Daniel's heart pounded.

When was the last time Johnny had snuck up on him? When had he gotten so quiet? Had he always been that quiet? That fast? Or had Daniel been that distracted?

"They're beautiful, I love them," he said before leaning in for a kiss.

Daniel had spent now practically 2 years in love with a man who curled up and read, who was quiet and warm and let Daniel paw at him any chance he got. He was so used to a sort of passive Johnny that he'd forgotten in there somewhere was a man trained to strike

first, to move swiftly and hard and to give no mercy. He knew that Johnny could probably kick his ass, but he hadn't equated it much to other aspects of Johnny or his life, the kiss he was giving Daniel gave no mercy in possibly the best way and Daniel curled his fingers in Johnny's shirt pulling him closer.

He didn't want to stop, he wanted to pull Johnny down onto the couch, to forget about anything else and just touch and kiss and- Johnny pulled away a smug look on his face.

"What?" Daniel asked.

"You are beautiful."

Daniel felt his face burn and swatted at him.

Johnny shifted back, away from him and Daniel wanted to run after him and jump him. He was pretty sure Johnny would catch him.

"Dinner is ready, when you are," Johnny said moving around the kitchen.

"I'm ready," Daniel said.

The sooner he ate the sooner they could do something else...no, Johnny had been nervous about this. Whatever fish it was, he'd put a lot of work into it and Daniel was going to compliment Johnny into a blushing mess. He passed the flowers, they'd been very carefully and lovingly transferred into a vase and Daniel leaned over to smell them. Johnny had liked them. Pride bloomed in his chest. He'd done well. Especially if the result had been a kiss like that. Maybe he needed to get Johnny more flowers.

He sat down in his seat.

That was a fun thing. Having a chair that was *his*. Because he sat in it. And Johnny had his chair. At *their* table. Just like they had spots on the couch and sides of the bed and spots for their toothbrushes. Some of his classmates, some of his teammates bemoaned moving in with one another and Daniel didn't get it. He loved it. He loved every little minute moment of it. All the small things.

A salad was set down in front of him and Daniel stared at it. He'd been expecting a fish. He'd been expecting rice. Why was he being given a salad?

He watched Johnny sit a salad down at his own place and then head back to the stove putting on oven mitts and grabbing a container with a lid. Oh, it was a side, or a starter. He guessed sometimes Mr. Miyagi made salads.

Johnny held his oven mitt over the container thought about it and changed his mind sitting down nervously in front of his own salad. They were going to start with the salad. Okay fine. Keep your secrets Johnny. Just a little longer.

"How was the shop?" Daniel asked.

"Busy."

"How many people gave you their number?"

"We were too busy for me to count. I think Tommy's aunt put in an ad for us that a bonsai would be a good gift for Valentine's Day. So we were as busy as a florist."

"Did you get a lot of chocolates?"

"Some, but I sent them home with Mr. Miyagi to share with everyone," Johnny said with a shrug.

Daniel stabbed at a tomato.

"How about you? How was school? Did you get any chocolates?"

"Yeah, actually, a couple girls gave me chocolate, I turned them down but they insisted."

Johnny nodded, like he'd expected that. Like it made sense that girls had given Daniel chocolates when they hadn't ever before. Daniel ate the last of his salad with a frown.

"Kumiko gave that magazine our info so they could ship something, and I think maybe you need to see it."

"I want to see what you made."

Daniel was hungry. He wanted to eat the main course, give Johnny his chocolates and move on to the real dessert.

"You will, just, I think I need to get it," Johnny said getting up and disappearing into the bedroom and coming out with a big box. He came back and sat it down next to Daniel.

"What is it?" Daniel asked.

"Just open it."

Daniel opened the box and looked in at a whole bunch of envelopes.

"What is this?"

He picked one up and studied it. It was in Japanese but addressed to him, he recognized his name, Kumiko had taught him how to write it. He scanned the letter. He knew some of the words. He looked over it at Johnny.

"They have 10 more boxes."

"What?"

"Our modeling stint was a hit. Everyone liked all of them, but you are getting a ton of fan letters. Kumiko said they'd reached out to her to see if we could go back, or more accurately, if you could go back and do more shoots."

"Me? Why?"

Johnny made more sense. He was classic looking.

"You are hot Daniel, you've got an unofficial fan club now."

"An unofficial fan club? What even is that?"

"I had Kumiko sign me up to find out, she just laughed, but I'm signed up. I get my first welcome packet in a couple of weeks. I'll let you know."

"What?"

"I'm debating being incognito or challenging the president of the club to a duel to become president of the club. But I think I'll have to greatly improve my Japanese."

Daniel looked down into the box. "All of these are for me?"

"Yes."

"And there's 10 more boxes?" Daniel whispered.

"Yup. It's one of the reasons they want you to go there, so they don't

have to ship them. It gets pricy."

"I don't understand."

"Daniel, you didn't get chocolates at our school because of Ali. Because all the girls were scared of talking to you or flirting and then we were on bad terms to start off with and they're friends with Tommy. It wasn't because you weren't hot, or they didn't like you. High school is a mess, and everyone was just trying to survive without social repercussions, and I'm sorry about that. I didn't realize how much would ripple. But it's not you."

"I didn't get any growing up either."

"Neither did I."

Daniel blinked looking at Johnny and then frowning. He would've given Johnny all the chocolates. Would've begged his mom to get him the best Valentine's Day gifts at the store to give Johnny.

"Bobby told me this hypothesis he has, and I'm going to share it with you. All through high school and up to high school people are struggling. They're trying to fit in and do what they can to have a somewhat smooth ride. It means making bad choices and pretending to be a person they're not. But then when they go to college there's so many more people and they don't know you and don't have the same cliques and you get to start over, so when they reach this age they get to try and be themselves again. It means the girls who thought you were cute before and didn't say anything now feel like they can. Though they can't, because you're taken, but it means they'll try. Because its a new frontier."

"Am I the new frontier?" Daniel asked amused.

"No. College. Life after high school. Being an adult."

"Do you feel that way?" Daniel asked.

Johnny played with the napkin ring, something Daniel never thought he'd own, never thought he'd have in his home, didn't even know it was a thing until Laura had descended upon their apartment with fancy little things and Daniel loved them, because they were pretty and tied the table settings together. Made home cooked meals feel even more special.

"I don't know if it's so much school being over, or being free," Johnny

said. "But I feel like I can be more comfortable now. Now that Sid and Kreese are gone."

"I suppose you and Bobby are right. I feel better now that I'm doing my own thing."

It was also nice to realize people liked him. Actually truly liked him. Not just fake liked him.

He frowned.

He didn't like that realization.

He tried not to think about Silver or about the whole past year after getting back from Okinawa. He tried to focus on the good stuff. He hadn't realized he didn't trust people to be...*real*. For their actions to be not tied up in some grand scheme. To be liked just by being himself. But there was a box sitting next to him full of notes in Japanese that he was going to practice his Japanese with and dig out his dictionary to better understand. And there were chocolates in his bag and he'd been invited to hang out and something that'd been sticking in his chest felt a little looser. Something he hadn't noticed.

He blinked rapidly. He was not going to cry during dinner over some self realization.

"Okay enough stalling, what did you make?" Daniel said.

Johnny blinked looking across the table at him.

"Right."

Johnny stood.

He cleared the salad bowls.

He was procrastinating.

He was putting it off.

He came back and took a bowl in one hand and then lifted the lid and Daniel pushed himself up to see, to see why Johnny had handed him letters rather than show him what he'd made, had made salad like he needed to have something safe just in case dinner was a disaster.

It was pale yellow.

It was crispy on top.

It smelled amazing.

Daniel looked up at Johnny then noticed something behind him in the kitchen that he hadn't seen before. A familiar looking machine. One that Daniel knew how to use. That Nonnia had taught him how to use.

Daniel felt those tears well up.

"Did you make your own noodles?" Daniel asked.

"Yes," Johnny said heaping a pile into Daniel's bowl and passing it to him.

Daniel leaned forward taking the bowl in both hands staring into it, stunned.

His favorite food.

Made from scratch.

Johnny hovered awkwardly, waiting.

Daniel grabbed a fork and took a bite.

It wasn't his mothers recipe.

It wasn't his Nonnia's.

It was different.

But the root was there.

Just like Mr. Miyagi said Daniel's karate had a root of Mr. Miyagi's karate but then was something else, would *become* something else. There was a part that Daniel realized meant Johnny had talked to his mother, his Nonnia, and had pieced together a recipe out of their memorized unmeasured recipes and then made it his own.

It was very good and it was a mystery.

It was salty and creamy, the perfect blend of cheeses, and Daniel couldn't recognize them all in one bite, which meant he'd have to eat more, figure out what it was.

The noodles were perfect.

"This is amazing," Daniel said, mouth full watching as Johnny, relieved, filled up his own bowl and took his seat again. Daniel hooked his leg around Johnny's the way he had long ago, but also not so long ago.

"Yeah?" Johnny asked softly taking a bite.

"Yes, you made great noodles and amazing mac and cheese."

Johnny relaxed and nodded, eating.

Daniel wondered how many attempts Johnny had made.

Who all had taste tested?

Johnny was the type to perfect things which meant a ton of effort had been put in on his behalf.

Johnny knew it was his favorite.

One dish, one meal, and if Daniel poked and prodded he was sure he'd see hours of phone calls, lessons with his mother, friends taste testing under secrecy, Laura probably taste testing as well, learning how to use the machine, collecting feedback and just so much work.

To be on the receiving end of that...to know that Johnny would never admit it. Knowing it'd probably been how he always was, a young Johnny working hard to be perfect at everything and for no one to recognize it for so long. Daniel didn't know if he wanted to save it or eat it all. He tried to eat slow, savor it.

"I don't know what all came in the mail, but Jessica sent us buckeyes."

"Oh. We didn't get anything in the mail, but we have enough sweets to last the rest of the month or possibly longer."

Daniel was going to bet Chozen. That Chozen had arrived and burried Johnny in chocolates under the ruse it was for the both of them.

"What were you sent home with?"

"The Browns dropped off a cake via my mom, it's a red velvet. She said she had to fight to get us something normal. They apparently were trying to send her with boozy cupcakes and she had to remind them we're not 21 yet. But she still had like a dozen of those, I think she took those to have with your mom."

"That seems unfair," Daniel said around another mouthful of mac and cheese.

"Your mom asked me to give you something."

"Wait, so how many times did our moms pop by the store today?" Daniel asked.

"Four times. Different levels of drunk," Johnny said.

Daniel could only imagine. Laura popping by in the morning with the cake and the boozy cupcakes, leaving, coming back after a boozy brunch with his own mother with a gift for Daniel and then gone again. Only to do that four times total, on a busy day at the store.

Daniel loved his mom, but he would've snapped at her.

"Chozen came by around lunch. He was very specific over who got what chocolates. There was a little note. I'll show you after dinner."

Daniel frowned, he bet Johnny's were nicer than his. Because of course they would be.

After dinner he swatted away at Johnny every time he tried to help clean up, instead of fishing the truffles he'd made at his mother's apartment for him out of his bag. He set the box in front of Johnny, pushing him back into his chair, leaning down to kiss him gently. "You cooked, I clean."

"But-"

"Don't say I picked up flowers or went to school. You also worked, and interacted with our drunk mom's multiple times today. So please enjoy something sweet."

"Are these the ones you made last year?" Johnny asked opening up the box.

"Yup."

Daniel watched Johnny carefully open the box while he moved leftovers into containers, pleased that Johnny had made so much. He was looking forward to eating those leftovers. Maybe for lunch after a lazy Saturday morning. Maybe he'd take it to class with him and to his apprenticeship. It was a valentine's day gift he could enjoy for awhile.

Johnny had bitten into one of the truffles and Daniel noticed a box

sitting on the counter with his name on it. It was in Johnny's hand writing. He wanted to open it but first he had to do the dishes. He forced himself to wait, turning around scrub at the pan, to wash up the last of their dishes that couldn't go in the dishwasher so that they wouldn't have to do it tomorrow and so that the pile in the sink didn't pile up and bother him.

When he finished up and turned around Johnny had moved. He was no longer sitting at their kitchen table but sitting on the couch looking at the stuff Jessica had sent.

The box that had been sitting on the counter with Daniel's name on it was gone. The flowers had been moved over to the coffee table as well.

Johnny picked up the Brutus doll then set it back into the box.

Daniel plopped down next to him. "I could've sworn I saw something with my name on it."

"You did," Johnny said. "But I figure you should see what your Mom got you and Chozen."

"So that box is from you?" Daniel said kicking up his legs over Johnny's lap. Johnny hooked his arms around them. "Yes."

"Alright, let's see," Daniel said picking up the one in his mother's handwriting. That one was easy. Perugina Baci.

"Mom always gets me Italian chocolates. Here, you should try one. They've got love notes in them."

"Love notes from your mom?" Johnny asked raising an eyebrow but taking one of the candies.

"Her and Dad used to exchange them and I'd get like other candies. But when he passed she missed getting them so she made me a deal. She buys a big box on Valentine's Day and I get half," Daniel said unwrapping his. He frowned looking at the note. *A mum's hug lasts long after she lets go.* It was like the chocolate knew it was from his Mom.

"What's yours say?"

"Lovers can live on kisses and water. It says it's an English proverb, I haven't heard of it. British English maybe?"

"I like that one."

"Really? Kisses and water? Not anything else?"

That felt like a trap. Answering that felt like a bad idea. Especially with Johnny's amused tone and the hand he'd put on Daniel's thigh.

"Okay there are more things I need then just that, it just *feels* like I could subsite on kisses."

"Yeah," Johnny said. He had a thoughtful look, like he agreed.

"Alright what did Chozen get you?"

Johnny picked up a little box with kanji written on it 本命チョコ. It was pretty, nice paper and Johnny popped it open to show chocolate hearts. They were clearly hand made with little toppings added in. They were cute and looked good.

Daniel was going to steal one of those and eat it. Just to make sure it wasn't poisoned. His was probably going to get like a single ball of chocolate that had fallen off the tray when Chozen had made Johnny's.

"These are yours," Johnny said picking up glossy black boxes and handing them over to Daniel.

"What?" Daniel said staring at them in confusion. The note in kanji was scribbled through multiple times. 超義理チョコ was marked out then 義理チョコ was also marked out and then 友チョコ was written out. Daniel looked at his box and then at Johnny's and then back at his box and then up at Johnny.

"Are you sure those aren't for me and these are for you?"

"Chozen was very clear. The big box is for you."

Daniel opened the box. There was too much inside. Chocolate dipped fruit, gold flaked truffles. More chocolates then he'd seen before, each different, some were colorful. He leaned back eyes wide then back up at Johnny.

"There's got to be a mistake."

"No, that's Compartes," Johnny said. "Chozen bought you that. Plus I can read your note."

"You can read my note, what does that mean?"

"友チョコ*, Tomo choco*, friend chocolate," Johnny said. "Maybe it's an apology?"

"If I got friendship chocolate then what the hell did you get?"

"Homemade chocolate? I don't know I can't read this as well. But he got you the good stuff, that's uh...very expensive."

Daniel stared at Johnny then down at the box horrified.

"What? What do I do now?"

"I don't know. We'll ask Kumiko next time she calls."

"Can we call her now?"

"It's like 11am on Saturday, let her sleep in."

"11am is sleeping in! That's plenty!"

"She said she was going out with friends and dancing. I doubt she got back before 4 am."

"7 hours of sleep is plenty," Daniel said but not moving, staring at the box, at the chocolates. "What do I do with all of these?"

"Eat them?" Johnny said with a shrug before carefully taking the boxes from Chozen and putting them on the coffee table.

"Eat them you say and then you move them away, Johnny what does that mean?" Daniel asked with a laugh.

"Here," Johnny said handing him a box. A familiar looking box with his name on it.

Daniel quickly opened the box, getting a whiff of lavender. He expected circles, stars, but instead all the lavender cookies were hearts. He grabbed one.

"Part of me wonders why we bother when we get so much from other people."

"I can take them back, give them to Mr. Miyagi to take home and share," Johnny said reaching over.

"No, these are mine," Daniel said holding his box of cookies out of the way and shoving the one in his hand into his mouth. "I'm not sharing."

Johnny laughed softly, picking up one of the chocolate hearts and taking a bite.

"Are they good?" Daniel asked around a mouthful of cookie.

"Yes," Johnny said.

"Is this how the rest of our lives are going to be? We try to keep things simple and fail and then everyone else adds to it and then we're just in a mountain of sugar and sweets?"

"Probably. The Browns told me to expect that one of the first times I went to visit them."

"Seriously?"

Johnny nodded. "I'm just relieved Abuela didn't send anything."

"I think we *just* finished off all the stuff from your birthday."

Johnny set the boxes of treats on the coffee table and leaned over, putting a hand on the armrest next to Daniel's head, kissing him. Warm and sweet, tasting of chocolates. Daniel dug his fingers into the soft fabric of Johnny's shirt, trying to pull him closer though Johnny didn't need the prompting. He shifted, gently moving Daniel's legs off his lap so he could get closer without folding Daniel in half.

Sometimes they lost themselves in kissing. They'd make a decision, just the two of them to watch a movie, or a show and instead when they came up for air again they'd realized they'd missed the whole thing. It's why they'd gotten a vhs machine and started taping their shows, setting the timer, just in case while physically there to watch it, they weren't actually there.

Johnny smelled nice. His hair was soft in Daniel's fingers when he reached up and hooked his arms around Johnny's shoulders. His weight wasn't fully on Daniel, but enough of it was pressed warmly against him, solidly that Daniel liked. It was comforting. Like in this little corner of the world he was safe.

He knew that had been Johnny's top priority when looking at apartments.

Security. Security cameras. Safety.

Daniel's had been sound proofing and privacy. But now he was grateful for it. Hadn't realized how much he'd tightened up about it. That sometimes when he was home, if Johnny wasn't home he didn't relax until he got there. How much worry had settled into his muscles and he'd just accepted that as normal? This high level of functioning under stress and worry and anxiety?

But Johnny made him feel safe. And there was something about having him on top of him that was comforting.

"Let's try it," Daniel said quickly when Johnny pulled away for a breath having moved on to kiss his collar bone. He froze, lips pressed to Daniel's skin, head popping back up to meet his gaze.

"Try what?" Johnny asked.

"You."

Johnny blinked at him it didn't translate, it was too vague.

Daniel's nerve was dying fast. He could be so blunt but this time, for some reason, it just wasn't easy. His face was burning.

Maybe if he kissed Johnny more he'd get more courage. It was well worth trying. For Johnny when things were off the table they were off until explicitly told they were back on, so he wouldn't even be thinking about it. It wouldn't be on his list of options unless Daniel was clear. There were benefits of it. It meant he didn't ever pressure Daniel or ask about things he knew Daniel wasn't interested in.

Johnny's hand was under Daniel's shirt, pushing it up to kiss more skin, so they were going in the right direction. Just not clear.

"Did we bolt the door?" Daniel asked.

Johnny sat back, fingers trailing down Daniel's stomach which tickled and glanced over at the front door. "Yes."

"Okay then," Daniel said sitting up and pulling Johnny's shirt up.

Johnny looked back at him amused, taking it off.

That helped. That helped a lot. He poked at Johnny's chest. He had a plan this time. If he got tense or overwhelmed he'd touch more. It was a good plan. He liked his plan. Simple. Effective. Fool proof. Well he

hoped it was fool proof for himself. That meant he was the fool.

"Are you sure we should be here and not-"

"Here is good," Daniel said. He didn't know why but he found the couch comforting. Maybe it wasn't romantic, maybe he'd find Johnny disenfecting it before the next time friends came over, but there was something about being shielded on one side that he liked. Or at least was working for the moment.

"Where-"

"The box under the coffee table," Daniel said.

Johnny turned to look at the lower level of the coffee table, the ornate box sitting on top of the coffee table books Laura had gotten them, the one Ali had gifted them. Big photography books of cars that Daniel found useful, record covers and photographs of musicians from rock music Johnny listened to, a travel book on Japan, and one on flowers.

Johnny picked up the box and Daniel add his clothes to the pile, nervous in a way he hadn't felt in a while grabbing one of the blankets off the back of the couch feeling too exposed all of a sudden and curling up in it.

"Is this what's in all these decorative boxes?" Johnny asked.

"Not all of them," Daniel said. "The one in the kitchen has nutmeg in it."

"Nutmeg?"

"Like the actual seed. There was a sale at one of the spice shops, so we just grate it ourselves. I was going to bake a lot with it," Daniel said draping one leg over Johnny's lap. He'd have to move it eventually. Probably. Maybe.

"Shower caddy in the bathroom, this box here, glove compartment in the cars..."

"Cookie jar in the kitchen."

"That's a dangerous one," Johnny said looking at him surprised.

"I thought it was kind of fun."

"You do realize the guys might think there are cookies in there and

then-"

"Get a handful of condoms instead?" Daniel asked with a laugh.

"Yeah."

"What did you think was in there?"

"Nothing," Johnny said. "I almost put cookies in there."

Daniel smiled tugging him down for another kiss.

"I did get you something else," Johnny whispered.

Daniel blinked up at him. He'd hooked his legs around Johnny's waist hoping that'd make it clearer. But now he felt protests riling up. Johnny had already made dinner who knows how much from scratch, noodles from scratch but Daniel was going to look in the fridge later and see if Johnny had made his own cheese too, feared he had and was hoping he'd just picked some up at the sanctuary. He'd made cookies. Now he wanted him to make one more thing.

He couldn't handle more gifts.

Just love. Focus on sex.

"I was at a shop," Johnny said. "I found this artisan who works with glass."

Daniel looked at Johnny in confusion. Why was he thinking about glass when they were going to have sex?

When Daniel was trying to position himself to be as obvious as possible at what he wanted without saying it.

"Will you show me after?" Daniel whispered his chest a little tight.

Johnny smiled and nodded kissing him again. Better. Hands-on him, exploring, touching, feeling. Daniel arched up against him. After a moment Johnny held the box in his hands and looked at Daniel.

"You want to try again? Like-" words seemed to escape him and Daniel bit his lower lip waiting.

He nodded. Maybe Johnny had caught on.

He was pulling away.

No.

Johnny had moved back, slightly down and then Johnny was taking him in his mouth. Daniel pulled the edges of the blanket around his chest, gasping in surprise. Moaning softly as Johnny worked. Maybe he hadn't needed to say anything. He wondered if he should've. Maybe.

Johnny always worried when he wasn't talking a mile a minute. But this was pleasant. He kicked up a leg over the side of the couch, ankle on the back of it to give Johnny more space. Maybe he'd gotten quieter. Had trouble talking as much as he used to. Got locked in his own head more ever since they got back from Okinawa. There were a lot of things he tried locking in boxes and tried not to think about. Lots of things he wanted to avoid. He tried to think he got over them but hadn't, not really. Or at least avoided facing them head-on and just buried them.

A slick finger was in and timed impressively well and Daniel moaned. He was 90% sure he'd be able to go through with it. He hadn't expected it take him this long to feel comfortable. In the grand scheme of things it hadn't been long but it felt long.

One of his classmates hadn't moved in with her boyfriend until after they dated for two years. She didn't think they'd get married until after five. The Cosmo he'd read while bored at the dentist had had a quiz on when to move in together and Daniel had gone through it wondering when they'd recommend and none of them recommended less than a year. And yet here he was.

Maybe it was different when one of you had an abusive ex-stepfather, a parent going through a terrifying and messy divorce, and the other's home had been demolished and mother had moved across the country to take care of a sick family member.

It had just made sense and it was better.

Sometimes Daniel missed it.

Living with Mr. Miyagi.

He missed the garden and the quiet afternoons with tea and he missed being asked to go fishing. But he wouldn't trade it for the world. The privacy or the time they had just to themselves. A lot of the magazines talked about finances and an idea of becoming a team, a unit and discussing all the big lifestyle choices. But Daniel kind of liked being

two individuals with separate bank accounts, who were making enough that that sort of question didn't come up. They split their bills and they split chores. Just like they had when living with Mr. Miyagi.

Sometimes living together didn't work. Someone did more cleaning or cooking, someone felt like they were contributing more financially and sure Daniel worried sometimes that maybe everything wasn't nice enough for a boy from the Hills. He dreamed of buying a house out there in Encino with a pool and a nice garden and to live there with Johnny. That would be what Daniel expected Johnny to want. A big house with a nice yard and lots of plants. Something fancy.

But Johnny seemed perfectly happy with their apartment. A quiet reminder that anything that was theirs was enough. If it'd had good security Johnny would've probably been okay with a studio apartment.

If his mother hadn't won her divorce. Maybe that's what would've happened and maybe even that would've been good enough.

He was so easy to please and had such low expectations that Daniel wanted to spoil him. To give him everything he could because Johnny didn't think twice about doing the same for him. He made it seem so easy to spend all his savings on Daniel. Because he knew what to do when there wasn't any money. He knew how to survive. Back up plan after back up plan.

Daniel never wanted him to have to think of back up plans like that again.

He wanted to dream nice dreams of the future. No worries about dangers or money or anything at all. And Daniel was so sure they'd get there. Sooner than any plan he'd made in a guidance counselors office.

His ten-year plan.

Graduate, move on from his apprenticeship, open his own place, move into a bigger apartment, buy a house, marry Johnny. But he kept his plan in his head because saying it out loud sounded like too much, that there was a chance he'd jinx it. He wanted to keep these wishes secret and deep in his heart until they were for sure.

"Okay," Daniel hurried to say before it was over. Before a combination of sensations tipped him over the edge. He felt like a wreck. Did Daniel tell him enough how good he was at this? Probably not.

Johnny's head rose up with a wet pop and he shifted, watching, waiting, still going slow but Daniel didn't mind this time. He felt like some of that irritation had been smoothed. The need to protect Johnny, to keep him safe, to always keep an eye out for danger....it'd all settled into a nice mundane life.

Daniel no longer questioned why his classmates talked to him.

He didn't over-analyze every single interaction he had with them, with his teachers. Every time someone slapped him on the back and told him he was doing good he didn't wonder if they secretly wanted something from him.

It wasn't perfect.

He still was uneasy when the barista on campus chatted with him, or if a professor said they wanted to talk after class about a project.

He didn't trust that any compliment was genuine or that every smile was real.

But he no longer jumped when someone walked up behind him, or someone taller than him leaned too close or brushed up against him. He no longer *only* felt safe in a select few places or with Johnny.

Somewhere along the way that feeling that had been a seed when he moved to LA, when he got jealous of all the Encino kids and their cool cars and their cool bikes and their big houses had festered rather than healed.

Having Johnny look at him, the way he did now. The way he always did helped that busted ego of his.

It was like a balm that Johnny let him touch and have what he wanted. That he got to be in control of the few things he could be in control of.

That he felt... wanted. And Johnny *definitely* wanted him. And that was a thrill.

He worried that if he hadn't been with Johnny if their paths had diverged then he'd have isolated himself after Silver pulled the rug out from under him. That he wouldn't love or be loved for a long time, too scared to be around anyone, to trust that he'd made it until he proved it to himself.

He'd be alone, except for Mr. Miyagi for a long time.

He was grateful, grateful to have Johnny and the guys, that his mother was in the same city, that everyone was there and that because of Johnny he had ridiculous experiences. Chances to feel cool and badass.

No one else he knew got hundreds of letters because they showed up in advertisements in Okinawa on a whim because the guy they liked got to model.

No one else got a gigantic box of chocolates from a once upon a time enemy that said they were friendship chocolates. And while Daniel still had a bad feeling about it, that there was something bad he was missing, he'd still been included and they *were* nice chocolates.

Johnny was kissing him again, waiting. Waiting for Daniel to relax around him to be less tense, Daniel was pretty sure it'd take years to be less tense, but even just a couple of months, heck *a month* had been a great improvement.

Socializing, getting out of the house, had helped. Shaking up his routine and starting a new one.

"You okay?" Johnny asked. "I can pull out."

"Don't you dare," Daniel said. "I'm good, you're good, you can move."

Johnny studied his face as if checking for lies.

Daniel nearly asked him why, why'd he'd think Daniel would lie about that, but then remembered how adamant he'd been last time when it'd been a no go. Last time when Johnny's gentle care had been irritating when Daniel felt like he had to prove something. Something that clearly he hadn't been able to bluff.

"Johnny," Daniel said putting a hand on Johnny's chest. "If you don't start moving I will start moving. Or we can both move, but I'm very serious."

Thankfully Johnny didn't need further prompting. Daniel knew his body and what he liked, or at least had figured it out. Johnny though seemed to have a good idea himself. A small part of him thought smugly that maybe he'd showed Johnny what he liked every single time. That he'd learned by example. Because it was good, toe curling, romance novel back archingly good and Daniel didn't know what he

wanted any more. There was too much of everything, but he wanted *more*.

He wanted to spend days with a flip of a coin. He didn't mind. He liked it. Both. And he had a feeling Johnny did too.

Those blue eyes were full of love and want, a need that Daniel felt in his veins. This opened up so many more doors. The more comfortable he became again, the more he healed. He could ask Johnny if he could do it standing, holding Daniel up with nothing behind him, just in the middle of the room, something Daniel wished he could do but knew he couldn't. Johnny could just lift him up, move him anywhere and Daniel liked that idea. Johnny could pick him up and gently set him on the countertops, they hadn't done that yet. There were so many more options, combinations, things to retry from a new perspective.

He was talking. Maybe too much. But Johnny was smiling, kissing him, not on the lips though Daniel noticed. His neck, his cheeks, a peppering of kisses. Daniel threw his arms around Johnny pulling him closer, kissing him, all hunger all need and Johnny met him with the same dizzying intensity.

Parts of it were the same, the intense feeling of pleasure, the feeling of release, but some of it was new.

Johnny started to shift back, to politely pull out and Daniel hooked his legs around Johnny.

"Stay."

"But-"

"Just lay down."

"I will crush you."

Daniel laughed, a breathy tired laugh. "You won't."

Johnny laid down, shifting slightly, brow furrowed, but wrapping his arms around Daniel as best he could. It was a comforting weight and pressure. Daniel waited to catch his breath, a question popping up to the surface.

"Why'd you stop kissing me?" Daniel asked.

"Now?" Johnny asked looking up at him amused.

"No, during."

"You were talking."

"So?"

"I didn't want to interrupt."

"I think you're the only person on the planet who never wants to shut me up."

"Oh definitely not," Johnny said smiling, "There's no way I'd want to do that, especially when you were complimenting me, telling me how much you love me, and also barely able to string together sentences."

"What?" Daniel asked.

"Do you realize what you talk about when we have sex?"

"Sometimes," Daniel said brow furrowed trying to remember what he'd said.

He couldn't. Not all of it. Did he want to know? No. Yes? No.

It was probably embarrassing. That smug pleased look made him think maybe he didn't want to know. Sometimes he spoke and didn't think about it, words didn't stop to register before falling from his lips.

"Well," Johnny said settling his head in his hand, elbow resting next to Daniel's head, looking down at him. "You usually tell me how pretty I am. How hot I am. How good I feel." He blushed a little, ears pink. "You also tell me how much you love me and go into details. This time...how much you were enjoying it came up a lot. How much you liked looking at my muscle from that angle-"

"It is very nice," Daniel said pushing some of Johnny's hair behind his ear. Fingers trailing down his arms. He patted Johnny's arm. "Okay, I'm ready. One more time."

Johnny laughed. "Is that why you didn't want me to-"

"Yup."

"How many one more times do you want?" Johnny asked pushing himself back up.

"How many do you think you got in you?" Daniel challenged.

"Plenty," Johnny said kissing the top of Daniel's forehead. "As long as I get water from time to time."

"Like your little chocolate?"

"The one you gave me? The Italian one? Yeah. Kisses and water and I should be fine."

"I would tease you about taking your time but-" Daniel shifted. He could feel Johnny's renewing interest and energy.

Johnny kissed him gently. "Let me give you that gift first."

Daniel frowned. "Really? Now? Can it wait until after this round?"

"No, it's still time out."

"Still time out? Who says?"

"Just let me-" Johnny reached into a bag Daniel hadn't noticed on the other side of the couch and pulled out something red and made from glass. He put it in Daniel's hands.

A jar. Daniel stared at it.

"For all the stuff you want to try."

Daniel looked at Johnny, then at the jar.

"It's ruby red," Johnny said.

It was pretty but what stuff was Daniel wanting to try. They already had a date jar.

Oh.

"Is this our sex jar?" Daniel asked. "Like are you saying I put all the ideas in here and then we'll draw them out and try them?"

Johnny blushed. "Out of all the things I expected you to call it, that was not it. But yeah. I mean I reserve the right to say no."

"Of course," Daniel said, running his fingers over the red glass, before very carefully setting the jar aside. That would be a fun project. He pushed himself up and kissed Johnny. "It's perfect."

Daniel was making coffee and waffles.

It was a lazy Saturday morning and he was waiting for Jonny to wake up again.

Johnny had already woken up once in a slow soft way in Daniel's arms. Daniel had rubbed up against him, partially a question, partially just to let him know that he was awake and Johnny had responded in a groggy but welcoming way, pressing close. Now he was partially sated, waiting for Johnny who'd fallen back asleep to wake up again. Daniel had only managed to get one word out of him, a response to *What would you like for breakfast?*
Waffles.

After a while, he heard the soft footsteps and turned to pass a mug of coffee into Johnny's hand. His hair was mussed, made worse from morning sex and Daniel loved it. He was wearing a robe, the short summer one, very loosely tied, like half asleep and well fucked he couldn't be bothered to do anything more than partially cover himself until after he had his coffee. Daniel wanted to grab him by the hips and pull him close and see if that would wake him up if he'd be surprised and turn red. If they could see if the dining room table was the right height to lay Johnny out on to enjoy.

But Johnny had already moved on in his sleepy motions, a warm soft kiss and then he'd plopped down with his coffee at the table, in his chair staring at the brown liquid, waiting for the smell to wake him up enough to drink it.

Daniel pulled the waffle off the waffle iron and plopped it down on a plate, setting it in front of Johnny before turning back preparing the next one and ready to wait, knowing that by the time Johnny finished his cup of coffee, once he'd had his waffle then he'd be down, ready to listen to Daniel's proposition.

A knock sounded and Daniel turned to Johnny. Their friends would've tried to get in with a key first.

"Neighbor kid keeps getting locked out," Johnny mumbled into his coffee.

Daniel sighed heading over to the door, unbolting it and throwing the door open.

"Morning Cuz," Louie Jr. said pushing past Daniel with a bag over his shoulder that he dumped onto the couch. "Oh, waffles! Awesome! Hey

Johnny!"

Johnny waved sleepily, not fully registering the same shock that Daniel was feeling. Louie Jr. was, for some reason in LA, with a bag, in his apartment.

Louie was talking to Johnny who was nodding, not really absorbing anything yet other than a little dose of caffine every once in a while Louie helped himself to the waffle that had finished cooking and was looking at Johnny, staring at the haphazard robe in a way Daniel definitely did not like.

He could feel his morning plans, lazy and sex-filled as they were, slipping from his grasp as he stood frozen at the door.

"Louie, what are you doing here?" Daniel said, hoping, begging the universe that Louie would fold the waffle up, shove it in his mouth, grab his bag, and head right back out the door.

"I came to stay with you," Louie said pouring himself a cup of coffee, taking his plate of waffles, and sitting down next to Johnny, making himself at home.

Chapter End Notes

Recipes:
filetto di pomodoro
tuscan chicken
arancini di riso
Mac and Cheese
Buckeyes

The chocolates Daniel and his mother enjoy with notes

Brutus the Buckeye mascot

The chocolate explanation.
Chozen made Johnny Honmei-choco. "These sweet treats are often hand-made for an extra personal touch and given exclusively to a significant other"
For Daniel he originally wrote:
Giri-choco – Roughly translated as ‘obligation chocolate’

There are different levels of this. You can read about the different chocolate levels and types given on Valentine's Day here. here.

Compartes. I tried to find a chocolate brand that was expensive and existed in LA in the 80's. This is what I found.

The poem Johnny quotes to Jessica

White Day

Chapter Notes

Hello again.

You may have noticed that the chapter number end is gone. That's because of...writer hubris.

I thought, ah yes I can tie this up in a single chapter. Well the last one was over 100k and every time I tried to transfer the document anywhere it murdered the program and made ao3 grumpy. And this...was 160k before I started editing and then because I guess I have a problem ... after editing it became 180k. 👄

There's no way ao3 would take that. So I've chopped it up into chapters that are more bite sized, which honestly... feels better? So we're going to try how we started. I've got about 15 chapters and I'm going to try and post them daily until we reach the end. 💖

Another note. I got a little confused at where the line is between M and E and at some point gave up and might've tripped over the line. So proceed with caution? If I need to change some tags or ratings let me know but I feel like I didn't fall that far over the line it's more like I lost the line, got confused and then gave up? And since you made it all the way here I'm sure you know it takes nearly 100 chapters for anything to happen so marking a 100+ chapter slow burn fic E feels...cruel? I don't know if that's right but.. I tried. That's really all I can say for myself. And thanks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A blanket was wrapped around him and Johnny stared blankly at it, confused. He wasn't awake yet.

He'd still been just sipping at his coffee, had only a bite of his waffle when it'd been draped over him.

It was the soft cozy one. The nice one.

He yawned.

Maybe he should go back to bed. He kind of wanted to. But if he did

he wondered if Daniel would join him. A nice lazy day seemed good.

Daniel was standing next to him stiffly staring at Louie. He looked unhappy.

"You know I was kind of expecting something else, but that's a look for sure," Louie said motioning toward Johnny with a shrug.

Johnny looked up at Daniel, his lips were pursed, that was no good.

He reached out, gently pulling Daniel into his lap. He hugged Daniel to his chest and pressed a kiss against the back of his head.

He smelled a little sweaty, a little like sex, but also like waffles and coffee.

Johnny put his head on Daniel's shoulder and cut up a piece of waffle. He offered it to Daniel who shook his head.

Johnny sat back and ate it. Being careful not to get syrup on Daniel or the blanket or himself. That was a huge task. So he switched to his coffee.

He wasn't awake enough.

"So this is what mornings look like here," Louie said.

"Louie how'd you get here?"

"I took a bus."

"A bus?

"Yeah. Easy peasy."

"Does your mom know?"

Louie got quiet eating his own waffle.

Daniel let out a sigh, a world weary sigh. "Louie, are you saying your mom hasn't heard from you for nearly 3 days?"

"It's fine ," Louie mumbled into his waffle.

Johnny took another sip of his coffee. He felt like he needed to focus. To wake up.

The atmosphere was tense. The quiet promises Daniel had made earlier seemed to be disappearing, fading.

The answer was more coffee.

He was still holding his fork, why was he holding his fork?

That meant he wasn't holding Daniel.

He set the fork down and wrapped his arm around Daniel again, sipping his coffee.

"Is he broken? What did you do to him?"

"He's not awake yet, give him time."

"He was more awake in Newark."

"That's because he wasn't comfortable."

"What? Why wouldn't he be comfortable in Newark?"

Daniel huffed another sigh.

"Oh right," Louie said.

"I don't get it either, but sometimes he sleeps really well and this is how he is in the morning. Takes a while for him to wake up on these mornings."

"Why do you look proud of that?" Louie asked motioning towards Daniel with his fork. "Wait, is it because-? Gross. Seriously? I thought you said you weren't doing that enough because your friends kept breaking in."

"They have keys, it's not breaking in. And we weren't expecting company."

Daniel shifted in his lap and Johnny met brown eyes.

He kissed Daniel. Warm, soft, sweet.

He wanted to go back to bed.

He needed more coffee.

Daniel pulled away, slowly, reluctantly and carefully combed his

fingers through Johnny's hair, fixing it.

He was going to have to get dressed wasn't he?

Johnny lowered his head and leaned his forehead against Daniel's chest.

He'd wanted to eat his waffle, drink his coffee and see what Daniel had up his sneaky sleeves. Maybe read later in the day. But he got the hint.

He had to wake up.

He sighed and lifted his head downing the rest of his coffee. He set the coffee down and waited.

Maybe Daniel needed to be wrapped up in the blanket.

He could do that.

Daniel's hand took his. Both of them.

"The blanket's for you. I'm going to make myself a waffle," Daniel said kissing his cheek and squeezing both hands before getting up, adjusting the blanket a little.

That made sense.

Daniel should eat.

Johnny scooted in towards the table.

Daniel poured him more coffee setting creamer and sugar out.

He drank his coffee and ate his waffle, looking around.

Louie.

Why was Louie there?

He'd said he'd taken the bus.

That was like a 2 day journey plus 17 more hours if lucky.

The kid had to be exhausted.

"Did you get any sleep?" Johnny asked.

Louie looked up from his waffle.

"Uh, not really."

"You should sleep," Johnny said. "That's too long to be awake. Eat, shower, sleep."

"Johnny," Daniel said softly. "He needs to talk to his mom."

Johnny blinked looking at Daniel who sat down next to him, he shifted towards him, gently pressing his leg against Daniel's.

"You stayed up for most of the flight to Okinawa, that was shorter. Did you call your mom once we landed?"

"Hey," Daniel said, then he studied Louie and sighed and took Johnny's hand in his. "I'll call your Mom and let her know you're here, you can shower and take a nap. Then we should talk. Deal?"

"Deal. Thanks Cuz," Louie said finishing his food and his coffee that Johnny was pretty sure had been Daniel's.

Daniel waved him off and Louie set his stuff in the sink.

"Bathroom is to the right," Daniel called when Louie looked around confused.

He sighed putting his head in his hand turning to Johnny.

"What?"

" What you say. You do realize, we just lost our privacy."

"What do you mean?"

"I could be wrong, but a LaRusso shows up on your doorstep unannounced they tend to not leave."

"Oh, I know that," Johnny said.

Daniel blinked at him then turned towards him fully. "Hey!"

"Best thing that ever happened to me," Johnny said with a grin taking another sip of his coffee.

It was hot under the blanket, it was too fluffy.

He shrugged it off.

Daniel had his mouth open as if he was about to say something but he didn't say anything.

"What?" Johnny asked.

"This isn't fair," Daniel complained.

"What isn't?"

Daniel turned his head towards the bathroom, staring and then turned back to Johnny. He leaned forward, towards him, kissing him warmly, putting his hands on Johnny's thighs.

"I wanted," Daniel whispered. "To spend the day just with you, between your thighs."

Johnny blushed as Daniel ran his fingers along the edges of the robe. Pausing to pull the robe back a little, lowering his head to press a kiss on his chest. Then flicking his tongue out and dragging it across Johnny's skin.

Dangerous. It was too dangerous.

"Johnny," Daniel whispered fingers in the edge of his summer robe. "It's frustrating to have you here, like this, and-" He gestured towards the bathroom. "Torture. It's like torture."

Johnny took Daniel's hand, carefully prying his fingers free from the robe. He kissed Daniel's fingertips.

He got it.

He sighed kissing Daniel, holding his hands in his.

"We'll figure it out, eventually, some time that's just ours. But, something must be up, he's been having a rough time after all."

"I know," Daniel sighed. Pouting. "But I wanted to make love to you after breakfast."

"I wanted to too," Johnny said letting go of Daniels hand and standing up. "I'm going to go get dressed."

" No ," Daniel said.

"No? Daniel I'm not going to just walk around covered in a warm blanket all day."

Daniel sighed with a pout, reaching out and touching the hem of the robe. "I love this."

"Love it huh?" Johnny asked, amused. "Want to borrow it?"

"No, well, maybe, but I love it on you," Daniel said. "I can see your chest, your thighs, there's so many nice options with it."

Johnny placed his hands on the back of Daniel's chair and leaned down to kiss him again.

Daniel's arms wrapped around his waist, sliding down grabbing his ass. Johnny could imagine that sweet weekend dream. A lazy day wrapped up in one another's arms, hands on one another, feeling, touching, being.

But.

They weren't alone.

Louie was there and Louie was a teen. And Louie was having a rough time. Really they were lucky that he'd shown up there and not run away somewhere else. Johnny had nearly done that, but he hadn't thought he had anyone to go to.

He'd have been lost to the wind.

Gone.

Like a ghost.

Damn, he should've walked away.

He should've just kissed the top of Daniel's head and given a little spin or something to tease Daniel and left to put on clothes for the day. Because he really hadn't dressed.

He'd just thrown on the robe when he got up the second time.

He hadn't slept in too long after. But Daniel's hands felt good and they were on his skin, sneaky sneaky hands, and even though he knew it couldn't go there because who knew how long of a shower Louie was going to take… however long it was wasn't long enough, and Daniel still had to call. But...dammit. It was like because his body

remembered, it was sensitive or something and he was moaning in the damn kiss he'd started.

Johnny wanted to take Daniel back to their bedroom. But they had to be responsible.

Responsible.

Why?

Why did they have to be responsible?

Johnny was tired of being responsible. He was tired of being in charge.

He was tired.

He wanted- Daniel pulled away.

Johnny nearly lost his balance leaning in after him.

Daniel studied him dark brown eyes and those damn beautiful lips.

"Fuck."

"Yeah."

"Maybe?"

"Maybe."

"No."

"Right."

"Dammit."

Daniel let out a frustrated groan. "Escape, run away,"

"Problem," Johnny murmured.

Daniel looked at him, eyebrow raised.

"I don't want to."

"Now? Now you-- all the times I tried at Mr. Miyagi's to seduce you?"

"I'm tired of being responsible."

"You're having your rebellious phase now? And this is what you're choosing to be rebellious on?" Daniel asked standing up. "Okay, I'm sorry for winding you up. I'm sorry for being a little too handsy. I'm sorry for pulling you back in. I'm sorry for teasing you. I'll figure out how to make it up to you. Sometime, when we have time."

Johnny sighed.

He was right.

This was a bad time.

What had he thought would happen?

He knew what he'd hoped.

That Daniel would make a quick call and then follow him into the bedroom.

He grabbed the blanket off the chair and threw it over his shoulders. He headed towards the bedroom. He tried to think of something else. Tried to pull himself back from the edge. Away from the warmth that was fading from where Daniel had been touching him.

He flopped onto the bed.

Maybe he'd go back to bed.

Restart his brain.

It took a while but he eventually pushed himself back up, got dressed, grabbed a book and headed back out.

Louie was out of the shower. He studied Johnny, then clapped him on the shoulder before passing him.

"We've got a couch, you can sleep here," Daniel said.

"Thanks," Louie said.

There were other blankets on the couch and a pillow. Daniel had probably gotten them from the closet and Louie curled up.

Johnny sat down at the table next to Daniel who was fiddling with a piece of paper. He passed it to Johnny as soon as he sat down.

He left a note. Didn't say where he was going. Aunt is happy he made

it safe. Requested we keep an eye on him for a little bit. Things are rough and chaotic at home and the less people around, as awful as it it is to say this, the better. Aunt will call Ma.

Johnny took the note and pen and wrote: What do you want to do?

Daniel took it back, scribbled, and passed it back. Johnny looked at the piece of paper. There was a stick figure bent over a surface You was pointed at it as another figure definitely wasn't just hugging the first one. Me the arrow said pointing at the other figure and there were a few little hearts around the two.

Johnny looked up at Daniel who grinned and winked.

They'd already both agreed that was a fail for the rest of the day.

Now he was just being a tease.

Cruel.

Johnny grabbed the pen from Daniel quickly flipping the paper over.

I meant about Louie Jr.?

Daniel pouted taking the paper back, writing longer than Johnny expected.

I guess he's staying here if that's okay. For a bit. Until things calm down at home and I can figure out why he came to us and didn't just stay with Nonnia and Nonnio. Or can talk him into going home. California might do him some good. For this exact moment I'm thinking I'll get some groceries. Things I know he likes and also something different for dinner. I don't want to leave him alone. Do you mind watching him while I go to the store? I mean you can just read.

Johnny nodded and Daniel got up, kissing his temple and giving his shoulder a squeeze before grabbing his wallet and keys.

It wasn't the day off Johnny had planned. But he read, he exercised quietly in their room, he helped put away groceries when Daniel got back. Louie woke up in the middle of the afternoon for lunch and then watched TV stubbornly sitting between the two of them on the couch.

"I've got class today," Daniel said, facing Louie who was rubbing his

eyes from his spot on the couch. "Johnny's going to the shop. We already called Mr. Miyagi, so he knows your coming."

"What?" Louie asked.

"Just be a little helpful okay? Like say hello to customers, help carry stuff. You should be in school but at least staying with Johnny and Mr. Miyagi will keep you out of trouble."

"But Cuz," Louie complained.

"You can't come to school with me and I'm not leaving you here alone."

"But I'm not a kid. What, you think I'm going to find your porn or something?"

"I don't think we have porn..." Daniel said thoughtfully before shaking his head. "No, I don't want you to accidentally set the place on fire or get lost in LA. I'd rather someone be in charge of you and Johnny's offered to hang out with you for the day, so be nice to him. He leaves in like a half hour so don't keep him waiting. I gotta go."

Daniel turned to Johnny, who was pouring a second cup of coffee for Louie, and kissed him.

"Have a good day," Johnny said.

"You too."

Daniel turned pointing to Louie. "Be good."

Louie sighed. "Yeah."

The door shut behind Daniel.

"How do you like your coffee?" Johnny asked. "We've got cereal, you okay with cereal?"

"Yeah, " Louie said. "Uh black."

Johnny nodded setting the coffee down on the table and then grabbing the cereal, a bowl, spoon and milk, setting it in front of Louie. He finished getting ready to go, moving the bonsai and making their bed. When he came back out Louie was standing by the door wearing his shoes and a jacket and with his hands in his pockets.

"Ready?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah," Louie said.

Johnny flicked off the lights and led Louie down to the garage and to the Avanti.

"Holy shit that's your car?" Louie gasped, running up to the red convertible.

"Yeah," Johnny said, unlocking the drivers side door and leaning over to unlock Louie's side.

"Can we drive with the top down?"

"Sure," Johnny said looking around to make sure there was nothing that would fly off when they reached a good speed or the wind picked up, and pushed the button.

Louie had looked kind of down but now he was looking around him in awe. Johnny had worried he'd be sullen, upset that he couldn't hang out with his cousin.

Which Johnny got. He'd also want to spend all day with Daniel if he could.

Johnny drove to the shop with music playing, Louie was looking around in wonder. Taking everything in. Johnny supposed he hadn't seen much, exhausted from such a long bus ride on his own.

He wondered why Louie hadn't called.

Why he hadn't reached out ahead.

They would've picked him up.

Maybe he didn't know?

"If you'd called, we'd have come to get you from the bus stop," Johnny said.

"Thanks," Louie said quietly, almost too quiet to hear over the wind.

Johnny parked the Avanti around back, behind Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees and put up the top, locking the car when Louie got out.

Louie looked up at the building with a frown.

"You really don't mind working here?"

Johnny looked at him blankly, putting his keys in his pocket.

"I mean, this isn't your dream, it's Mr. Miyagi's right? And it wasn't your idea, it was Daniel's. Don't you feel kind of...abandoned?"

"I like plants," Johnny said with a shrug. "And I see Daniel every day."

Louie stared at him and Johnny stared back for a moment, waiting to see if he had anything else to say or ask before heading towards the door and motioning for Louie to follow.

When they got in Johnny went to work setting up. Turning on the lights, taking stock of the stuff from the night before, looking over all the trees with a little clipboard.

"Where's Mr. Miyagi?" Louie asked.

"Every other Monday we take a half day, but we alternate. It's his turn. He'll be here around lunch."

"Why?"

"So we can get errands done. I open on my own this morning."

"Isn't that... a lot of work to do by yourself?" Louie asked with a frown.

He was following Johnny. Closer than Johnny would've liked. But he supposed Louie didn't know where to go, or where to sit or what to do. He'd have to think of something for Louie to do. Too bad he didn't have paper and crayons, but Louie was probably too old to be put in a corner and asked to draw nice pictures.

"It's not that bad. We don't get busy until around lunch time anyway, which is why Mr. Miyagi and I agreed on this time to run errands. You can sit here if you want," Johnny said patting a stool.

He flipped the sign to open and sat down in front of one of the bonsai's he was supposed to work on.

Louie sat down across from him on the stool.

"So, you cut these all day?" Louie asked.

"Not all day. Mr. Miyagi does most of the cutting. When Daniel worked here I did more of the backroom stuff. I'd do supply runs for

soil and pots and anything Mr. Miyagi needed. Daniel answered calls and did the sales stuff. I do that now. And then take the books home for Daniel to balance once a month or so."

"So you talk to customers?"

"Yeah. And take orders and do designs."

Louie sat back thoughtfully then leaned forward looking at the tree.

"And your not like mad at Daniel or anything?"

"For what?" Johnny asked.

"Buying this place, setting it up and then changing his entire course of life."

"No," Johnny said. "This is Mr. Miyagi's dream, like you said. I think it's really sweet of him."

Louie frowned. "Why aren't you doing karate?"

"I do kata with Mr. Miyagi," Johnny said. "And Daniel."

"I mean tournaments and stuff. Aren't you some karate badass?"

"I was, I suppose. Once upon a time."

"Once upon a time," Louie repeated. "Seriously? Seriously seriously?

"What?" Johnny asked.

"You. Didn't you win two tournaments? Didn't you go to Okinawa and learn like ancient techniques? And now, now you don't really practice? You just stopped?"

"Louie, karate is...a difficult subject for Daniel and I at the moment."

"How?"

"Do you know about my old sensei?"

"Yeah," Louie said sourly. "And that Silver guy. But you still put in all that work. You put years of your life into studying something and now-- now you're giving it up to cut trees in a dusty shop? By yourself? Where are your friends? Where are the people falling over themselves because you've got trophies? This isn't badass. This is...this

is...sad. You've been left behind."

Johnny set his tools down and looked at Louie. He'd spoke as if it hurt him . Not Johnny. Johnny wasn't sure they were really talking about Johnny or karate. Maybe it was a metaphor. A front. Something Louie was projecting onto. Which meant Johnny had to be careful. Tread slowly.

"I'm happy where I am. To be fair, I also put years into learning other things and had to stop learning them as well...maybe I'm used to it. Louie, what do you want to do?"

Louie stared at him for a moment. "What else did you have to stop learning?"

"All sorts of musical instruments, surfing, magic, all sorts of stuff," Johnny said.

"You can do magic tricks?" Louie asked.

"It's been a long time," Johnny said.

Maybe it wasn't that deep. Maybe Louie did pity him or something.

The door opened and Johnny saw Chozen walking in with his two cups of coffee. Louie turned then reached over and smacked Johnny on the arm.

"Aren't you supposed to say welcome to Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees or something?" he whispered.

"Good morning Chozen," Johnny said.

Chozen motioned to Louie with his coffee cup, "Whose this?"

"Oh, wait you're Chozen? Like the Chozen?" Louie asked standing.

Chozen passed a coffee to Johnny.

"Louie Jr. LaRusso meet Chozen Toguchi, Chozen Toguchi this is Daniel's younger cousin Louie Jr."

"Another LaRusso?" Chozen asked. "How many are there?"

"Quite a lot of them actually," Johnny said taking a sip of his coffee watching the two of them carefully.

"Hey, did you really fight my cousin to the death in Okinawa?" Louie asked leaning forward towards Chozen.

"Uh, yeah," Chozen said with a frown.

"What are you doing here?"

"He's a karate master. He's working on opening the Miyagi-do dojos," Johnny said.

Both turned towards him surprised.

"No way," Louie said eyes wide. "Do you do that chores are actually secret lesson stuff?"

Chozen blinked and looked back at Louie. It looked like he regretted coming in and was trying to find an escape.

"No. Government contract. I will teach a regular dojo."

Louie nodded clapping Chozen's shoulder, leaving it there for a second. "When do you open?"

Chozen looked at Johnny who shrugged.

"Not sure yet. Speaking of dojo. Gotta go back to work. Bye," Chozen said raising his coffee in a cheers towards Johnny and heading back to the door.

Louie turned back to Johnny, hands coming down on his shoulders. "That was a karate master? You seriously have sensei's who just show up? And you don't, you don't study? Why aren't you learning with him?"

"His dojo used to be my dojo," Johnny said quietly. "I'm not ready."

"Your dojo," Louie repeated.

His hands were heavy. It was bizarre that he was related to Daniel. He was taller, broader. But he was touchy. Like Daniel.

"Oh shit, Cobra Kai?" Louie asked after a bit stepping back.

"Yeah," Johnny said.

He drank some more of the coffee.

"How'd that happen?"

"I made it happen," Johnny said.

He needed to just cut a few more things and then this bonsai would be done.

Five minutes. He needed five minutes of quiet. Of peace. But he wasn't going to get that and it was unfair to ask for it.

"Asked him to."

Louie sat down on the stool again, slowly. "I bet he's made it different huh?"

"I'm sure he has. My mom went, she said it's different. But... I'm not ready," Johnny said. "If you want to go, we can get you a ride out that way with Chozen or Sato, but I can't, and I don't think you should ask Daniel."

"Yeah, I'm not going to," Louie said quietly looking at the table.

He seemed to get quiet for a bit and Johnny jumped at his opportunity to work on the bonsai.

Focus.

Quiet.

Everything he needed.

He made a snip. He went to work.

It was almost done.

Just a few more minutes.

Just a few more breaths and-

"You like Daniel right?"

So close.

"I love him," Johnny said.

"What do you love about him? How'd you know?"

Louie was lucky. Real lucky. That he'd picked Daniel to talk about.

"I couldn't stop thinking about him. And once I was no longer...mad. Once I was no longer angry, once I reevaluated everything, all that was left was love."

"And Daniel being Daniel?"

"You mean a guy?"

"Well you dated a girl before that right?"

"And a guy before her," Johnny said.

Louie blinked. "Woah really? So it wasn't just Daniel? Did you actually like the girl?"

"I thought I loved her."

Louie frowned. "You did? But don't you...love Daniel? So like if this girl came back would you go back to her?"

"No."

"How do you know for sure? If you loved her then-"

Johnny sighed running a hand through his hair.

"I said I thought I loved her. It was complicated. I'd tied my entire future to our relationship and when it ended so did my plans, safety, and security. Daniel arrived right when this was all crashing around me and right smack in the middle. I was all in. And I got it thrown back in my face. Sometimes I didn't learn my lesson, that if something hurt to avoid it. But with this, with her, I did. I was in love with the dream of a future not meant to be."

"And what was that dream?" Louie asked.

"Nice house. Marriage. Sid would have at least one nice thing to say about me," Johnny said.

" One nice thing?" Louie asked with a frown.

"He liked Ali. He sent me ring shopping."

"You were going to actually marry her? Wait, do you still have the ring?" Louie asked.

"Somewhere. I'm sure I do."

"Did you ask her?"

"Never got the chance. Which is a good thing."

"A good thing?"

"Yeah, this is better."

Louie looked around. " This is better."

It sounded like he didn't believe Johnny. Johnny picked up his coffee and had another sip.

"I feel better."

"So instead of being a rich married karate master, you're happy assisting Mr. Miyagi with his dreams and dating my cousin?"

"Your cousin is wonderful."

"I know that, but…But like don't you regret anything ? Or want more ?"

Johnny tapped thoughtfully on his coffee cup. "Yeah."

"See? Like what?"

"I regret being awful to Daniel."

Louie waved at him. "Yeah yeah got that one, all was forgiven, you're past that one."

"You asked though."

"I meant like with this chick and other stuff."

"I do want more I suppose."

"Yeah. How so?"

"Same stuff. I want to live in a house that's ours and marry Daniel."

Louie let out a groan. "You're a black belt in karate! Don't you want to be out on adventures? Kicking ass, saving people?"

"Karate doesn't make you a superhero."

"You want everything so...mundane and boring."

"It makes me happy. I don't need much."

"Clearly."

As the week progressed Daniel pushed on one thing he said he was adamant about. They cooked every night, which normally they didn't. And every dish was easy Italian, but Louie hated it. Mostly because he made Louie help him.

"Louie come on, you gotta learn."

"I don't wanna."

"Cooking is important. You can't eat out all the time it gets expensive."

"Why don't you cook with Johnny?"

Johnny looked over his book to see Daniel hand held up in the air from where he'd been gesturing, pausing.

"Johnny knows how to cook," Daniel said.

It almost sounded like he was disappointed.

Why would he be disappointed that Johnny knew how to cook? Surely it was a good thing? Daniel liked when Johnny made dinner...right?

"So?" Louie asked. "You two are practically glued to the hip except at dinner time. I know you cuz, stop trying to teach me and play with Johnny."

Daniel blushed, kicking at the tiled floor in the kitchen.

Strange.

Why was he embarrassed?

Johnny mulled over what Louie had said but he didn't get it.

Louie got himself a soda out of the fridge and sat down at the kitchen table picking up one of their magazines. He made a motion towards Johnny and Daniel's eyes met Johnny's.

"Do you want to cook together?" Daniel asked.

"Sure. What did you want to make?"

"See?" Louie said, rolling his eyes opening his can of soda.

"We've got chicken and zucchini, so I was thinking of this garlic chicken recipe."

Johnny put a bookmark in his book and set it aside.

"What can I help with?" he asked washing his hands at the sink.

Daniel gathered ingredients setting them out. He passed some garlic to Johnny.

"Could you mince this?"

Johnny started peeling the garlic and after a moment Daniel peered over his shoulder.

"Can I help?"

Johnny laughed. "Yeah."

He sat the garlic cloves back on the cutting board.

Daniel handed him a knife, then put his hand over Johnny's. "You can press down until you hear the skin crinkle. Then they'll peel easier."

"Why not just microwave them?" Louie asked.

"Huh?" Daniel asked.

"My mom sticks 'em in the microwave for like a minute in cold water. Skin comes right off," Louie said.

Johnny felt Daniel, close, thoughtful, while Johnny carefully pressed down on the garlic cloves, listening for that sound.

He heard it and removed the knife setting it aside.

"You don't want to cook but you want to backseat cook?" Daniel asked.

"I don't think anyone backseat cooks," Louie said with a laugh. "But I get it, you want to be handsy with Johnny so of course that method gives you an excuse. It'd be kind of silly to try and flirt over garlic in a bowl. Though maybe you just haven't figured out the right way to do

that. I bet I could."

"No, you stay over there."

It had been a while.

Louie kept sitting between them on the couch so they couldn't cuddle while watching TV like they usually did.

They couldn't do anything in the bathroom because the last time Johnny had gone in just to give Daniel a quick peck on the cheek before he had to run to the shop while Daniel was brushing his teeth Louie definitely thought it was for more and had knocked to tell them that their next apartment needed two bathrooms so that they could bone in a private one and guests could still use the other.

It was just at night, when they were sure Louie was asleep that they got to do…anything. And because they hadn't gotten to relax and chat it was mostly that. Talking about work, about how Louie Sr. was doing and what news Daniel had heard from Lucille and his aunt. What he'd done during the day with Louie that Louie hadn't talked about at dinner.

Work was busy, spring was coming and people wanted plants. And they'd seen the interview with Mr. Miyagi and the photos and Johnny was hauling more dirt in from the shops and talking with more people and he wasn't staying awake as long as he'd like Curled up with Daniel but he always fell asleep before anything happened. And it wasn't like Daniel wasn't exhausted too. When he wasn't working or studying he was dealing with Louie. And Louie was exhausting. Thankfully he had a million questions for Mr. Miyagi when he came to the shop and Mr. Miyagi seemed to withstand the tidal wave.

They'd gotten too busy. And Johnny had watched Daniel cooking with Louie throughout the week though Louie refused to do more than the bare minimum to help.

He liked teaching cooking, and maybe Louie was right, maybe Daniel was looking for excuses.

So how could he help?

"What next?" Johnny asked.

Daniel let go of him and got a lemon and set it down in front of him. "Grating and juicing."

“Any tips or tricks for that one?” Johnny asked

Daniel’s arms wrapped around him as he puzzled over the lemon as if it was foreign and new.

“I can’t watch this,” Louie said grabbing his soda and heading off to watch TV.

“Pick the smallest side of the grater and try to avoid getting any white bits, the pith is bitter.”

Johnny went to work. It was weird to have Daniel latched onto him while he was working. It wasn’t bad, there was also something comforting about it, to feel him warm and against his back.

Daniel walked him through all the steps just stuck close instructing him.

Daniel stepped aside when it was time to cook, moving instead to stand next to him, arm wrapped along the small of Johnny’s back and hand in Johnny’s back pocket that he was trying dutifully not to draw any attention to since Louie was still engrossed in the TV. But Daniel was doing his absolute hardest to make it difficult to focus. He kept squeezing.

It took longer to make dinner that night but it was nice and Johnny didn’t mind.

Louie plopped down at the dining room table, his hair was messy and he was yawning. Johnny flipped through the letter he'd been saving to read that morning, kind of like the morning paper.

He'd wanted to share it with Daniel the night before but Daniel had come home late and tired and had gone straight to bed after kissing Johnny.

He'd wanted to read it together, but he was getting impatient.

He flicked the envelope open and a small glossy card fell out. He picked it up and grinned. Daniel would be delighted. Embarrassed and he'd protest it, but he'd also be secretly pleased and it'd give him a little pep to his step.

Which after a long night working at his apprenticeship might do him some good.

Daniel sat down passing Johnny a cup of coffee and working on his oatmeal with a bleary eyed look.

"You look pleased," Louie said. "What's that?"

"Oh," Johnny said. "It's a letter from Kumiko."

Daniel's face rose from his oatmeal, interest peaked.

"The girl from Okinawa?"

"Yup, she's in Tokyo now. I sent her some money and asked her to help me with something and it came."

"What's that?"

Johnny set the card on the table. It was glossy and laminated and the size of a business card. Johnny was going to put it in his wallet and show the guys the next time he saw them. He'd also have to show it to Lucille.

Louie leaned forward squinting. "I can't read it, it's in Japanese. Daniel, you're studying, what's it say?" Louie asked pushing it towards his cousin.

Daniel picked up the card, mouth moving to read the words to himself quietly, to sound out the kanji.

He spluttered and coughed and looked at Johnny.

"You didn't!"

"I said I would," Johnny said.

"What? This isn't fair, clue me in. Or wait, is this a sex thing?"

" No it's not a sex thing," Daniel said, tone utterly exhausted, directed at Louie. "Johnny joined my fan club."

"What fan club? You have a fan club? Why do you have a fan club?"

Johnny reached over the table and snatched up his membership card. He openined his wallet putting the card away next to the Polaroid he always carried. He stared at it with a fond smile. He had more now.

Lots more. But he liked that first one a lot.

“We did a modeling shoot in Okinawa and I guess it was popular.” Daniel said with a frown.

“And they found out that Daniel did karate and was taught by an Okinawan native and won the championship twice and it sort of snowballed. It’s a small fan club but it’s organized,” Johnny said.

“What constitutes small?”

“At least a couple hundred according to Kumiko,” Johnny said.

“Do you have a fan club?” Louie asked.

“I’m not sure,” Johnny said with a shrug.

“How are you not sure? Don’t you actually model? Like since you were younger? Aren’t you in more stuff?”

“Yeah, but I just like that I can say I’m an official card carrying fan of Daniel,” Johnny said with a grin watching Daniel’s face turn red.

“You’re ridiculous,” Daniel said.

“And you love it.”

“I’m going to go watch TV, this is too much,” Louie said grabbing his bowl of cereal and waking over to the couch.

“We should call Kumiko and chat with her. I’ll let her know it arrived and we can ask her about White Day while we can.”

“Dammit I forgot,” Daniel said rubbing his face. “I’ve got time tonight. And Louie’s going to Ma’s for dinner.”

"Moshi Moshi."

"Hello Kumiko this is Johnny and Daniel. I got the card," Johnny said.

"We actually have some questions for you," Daniel said.

They were pressed in close together on the couch next to the phone.

"I've got a little time before I have to go. What's up?"

"White Day," Daniel said.

"Ah, yes," Kumiko said.

"Chozen got us stuff, and I was talking to Mr. Miyagi and uh...I think I need to better understand what Chozen wrote."

"What did he write?" Kumiko asked, amusement in her tone.

"Um he made me chocolates and wrote Honmei-choco," Johnny said grabbing the piece of paper and reading it carefully.

"And I got something Johnny recognized that was store bought," Daniel said leaning forward to grab the piece of paper for his.

"Oh easy. Johnny, just make some chocolates. I'm sure the Browns could help. Daniel, if it's store bought, you buy something of the same price or worth more for White Day."

Daniel froze mid-reach.

"Pardon?"

His voice came out strangled.

"What did he write?" Kumiko asked.

"Tomo choco," Daniel said, brown eyes wide looking at Johnny.

"Aww how sweet, yeah so friendship chocolate. It means you guys are friends and not an obligation. Which is what Giri choco is. You would not believe the amount of Giri chocolate I had to buy for the dance studio. But come White Day I'll get it all back on the same level or better."

"If it's not?" Daniel whispered.

"Oh then it's a slight, it means you reject the friendship. Tomo choco is an easy soft ball Daniel. Easy win. Johnny's got to make chocolate. Or I guess you could do what Miyagi-sensei and Sato-san are doing,"

"What are they doing?" Johnny asked.

Daniel's hand gripped his so tightly he thought Daniel might crush a bone.

"Aunt Yukie made them chocolates, so they're making her a fancy dinner, oh but it's a secret, don't tell her. They're very excited about it."

Johnny smiled softly, Mr. Miyagi had been talking about a dinner he was planning.

"So Johnny needs to make something, equal to the chocolates in time and difficulty ideally, and Daniel's got to just go shopping. Easy."

Johnny looked at Daniel, remembered the fancy chocolates, remembered the price of those.

"Can Daniel make Chozen chocolates?"

"I mean that's supposed to mean more....why? What did Chozen do?" Kumiko asked voice tinged with suspicion.

"He bought Daniel really fancy chocolates," Johnny said. "With uh, gold leaf and everything."

"Oh."

"Oh?" Daniel squeaked. "What does ‘oh’ mean? I thought we were maybe moving onto something better you know, not that-that Chozen was challenging me to a polite off with money on the line!"

"That..."

Kumiko's voice came through with a breath, like she was laughing and trying very hard for them not to hear.

Johnny heard her take a deep breath and continue.

"Sounds like Chozen."

Johnny couldn't tell what expression Daniel had on his face. Pained. Annoyed. Shocked. Frustrated.

"You know," Johnny said softly. "Maybe my mom can help."

"How?" Daniel asked looking at him wide eyed. "Because most likely Chozen made a big deal about it. So Yukie, Sato and Mr. Miyagi are aware that he's trying to start a new leaf, trying to build that bridge and if I do not meet him there, at this ridiculous high mountain that costs money to get to. I will look bad. In front of Mr. Miyagi! And Chozen will win. He cannot win. He wants to do a polite off? Well

fine. Fine!"

"Mom knows all the ridiculously expensive stuff, the best of everything, and the people who make a lot of it," Johnny said softly, putting his hand on Daniel's knee, hoping to ground him, to pull him back before he got too wound up.

"Kumiko, do we owe you chocolates?"

"Nope, don't worry about it. Just come visit me and see my show," Kumiko said.

Johnny took over while Daniel chewed on his lip. Asking about the show, about Tokyo, about the troupe, and then wishing her a good rest of her morning. When he hung up he looked at Daniel and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Hmm?"

"Don't hurt yourself."

"What? Why'd I hurt myself?"

"You're upset."

"Yeah? So? Chozen is so...."

Daniel couldn't seem to think of a good word and just let out a frustrated sound and shook his hand in a way Johnny had noticed seemed to be an angry LaRusso family tradition from back in Newark.

Johnny reached out and pulled Daniel into his arms.

"I'm sure you'll think of something. You can win a polite off."

"Since when is this my life?" Daniel complained turning to press his face against Johnny.

He had that look in his eye, the one he got when he was upset and was going to bite Johnny.

"Hey, it'll be okay, just don't-"

Too late. At least it wasn't as hard as that first time. That one had hurt and had been in public.

Johnny sighed, rubbing Daniel's back. He'd let go and moved, nose

pressed against his neck. Johnny had a bad feeling he was going to get bit again. He could feel Daniel's breath on his neck, felt the warm wet brush of his tongue and shivered.

"Want me to call my mom and set up a time for you two to come up with a solution?" Johnny asked quickly.

He was trying to keep them on track. Focused. Because Louie could come home at any minute.

"What are you going to make for Chozen?" Daniel asked, voice low, hand trailing low.

"I don't know. I'll talk to the Bro-ah-wns," Johnny squirmed as Daniel gave a firm squeeze.

Bad idea.

Again.

Louie.

Any minute.

The kid had keys.

" Daniel."

He tried to sound normal, stern even, a warning that this was a bad idea, but instead it came out almost like a needy whine and he flushed red.

He tried to clear his throat.

Tried to focus, to breathe, but Daniel palming at him wasn't helping.

"Whatever you make I want to taste."

"I'll bring you home plenty," Johnny said, hands gripping Daniel's shoulders as Daniel moved his hand, slipping beneath his clothes. A cool soft touch.

"Should we celebrate White Day?" Daniel asked thoughtfully, an air of faux innocence.

As if he wasn't aware of what he was doing. As if Johnny wasn't struggling to pay attention or could hold an actual conversation

anymore.

"H-how?"

He'd been so focused earlier.

He'd had a plan.

To keep them on track and now, now that was out the window.

It couldn't be his fault if Louie came back.

Once he'd thought their apartment was perfect. That for him and Daniel, their friends and family it was absolutely the best place. He remembered touring it and thinking it was wonderful. Perfectly secure. But now as Daniel smiled at him whispering dirty things in his ear. He realized maybe they needed a bigger place.

Or rules.

Or a vacation.

How long would they need to live by themselves before it wouldn't feel like they were stealing moments anymore?

Was it because Louie had showed up or because of their separate work lives?

Or was this going to be their entire lives?

It didn't matter. Thoughts were gone. Instead just the pleasant torture of Daniel crowding into his space. But not in the way he liked best. He wasn't going to ask for more though. They didn't have time.

Thankfully, arguably, it was over fast.

Daniel pulled a blanket over him as he came back down.

"We'll do something fun, something nice."

Johnny nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak when he heard the keys in the lock. He pulled the blanket closer around himself. Feeling too exposed despite being fully dressed.

Daniel sighed. Grabbing tissues and cleaning off his hand. "When's that kid going home?"

"Hey cuz!" Louie called toeing out of his shoes. Which was a relief because that had been a big sticking point at first. Something that Daniel had suffered to try and explain for days. Leading to the weirdest argument Johnny had ever witnessed. "You okay Johnny?"

"He's fine. Hey, let's make Auntie's Caprese Chicken for dinner tomorrow huh?"

"What? Why?" Louie asked with a frown.

"Because you gotta learn how to cook Louie. A LaRusso must cook."

Louie sighed, "Fine."

Johnny watched them go over the recipe, to talk about dinner with Lucille, waiting for his heart to calm back down and when it did he gathered the blanket around himself and headed off to their bedroom to change.

Next apartment had to have two bedrooms.

Johnny sunk down in the booth. He was the first one to arrive and went ahead and ordered an appetizer. Dutch arrived next sitting next to him and helping himself the the chips at the table.

"How's having Louie over?" he asked with an amused smile on his face.

"Has Daniel been complaining to you about that?" Johnny asked.

"Near constantly."

"When do you guys even talk? He's been so busy with school and the apprenticeship I feel like I barely see him."

"I get coffee with him on campus. They've got this nice coffee shop I like. And he gets a student discount."

"You don't need to take advantage of a discount."

"I know, but it makes it feel like the real experience you know? That's what they're all doing. Trying to live on a budget and trying to focus on learning and living on their own. Yet they're not. They're so close

to home that if anything comes up it;s fine. I just want a taste of that, so I'm bothering Daniel and having coffee with him."

The way Dutch said it gave Johnny pause and he turned, studying his friends face. His natural hair color was peeking out under the roots. It'd been a while. A long time since he'd seen that.

"Why are you having coffee with Daniel. Really?"

Dutch looked at him surprised. Shocked.

"It's just coffee man," he started and then his shoulders slumped. "Fine I've been worried okay? The guys have each other if something happens. But Daniel's been through a lot and like we used to go for runs and what not and I could keep an eye on him. I had like a temperature gauge. Knew whether he was sinking into a dark place and could try and help push him back up. And now, well I'm leaving soon and I won't be able to check in on him as easily. He can be, squirmy you know? Squirrelly. He can shut down and hide how he's feeling if you don't catch the signs and it can fester. I don't want that happening. Not while he's alone. I mean yeah he's got you but you're at the shop. And he's at that job and school. The guys see each other all the time. So...so fine, I'm making sure no one's bullying him on campus or like preying on him. Happy now?"

Johnny smiled softly reaching over and squeezing his arm. "Dutch."

"You take your hand away or I'm going to fucking hold it man," Dutch threatened.

Johnny didn't move his hand.

Dutch snatched it up. Looking away from him. "I just want to make sure you're all okay before I go."

"I know," Johnny said, giving Dutch's hand a squeeze. "You need to have fun on your trip. Don't worry about us. We'll be okay. Not because you're gone, but because we know even nearly 6,000 miles away you'll have our back. Because you always do. No matter what dumb shit we do. You're a great friend and I don't want this goodbye that's coming up to be sad. Don't distract yourself in worrying about whether we're getting into fights or not, or if we're getting into trouble. Focus on you. Focus on your adventure, on all the things you want to do. Your own fights. Your own stories and we'll be there. We'll come visit. I promise. And we'll call. And we'll ask you all about what's going on and how it's going and we'll listen to all your stories.

Look forward without worrying about us behind you, because we'll catch back up with you as soon as we can."

Johnny moved closer, wrapping his free arm around Dutch.

"You'll leave us in a good place, promise. But we'll still miss you."

Dutch leaned against him. "You both need to be careful okay?"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I won't be here to keep you out of trouble."

"Wouldn't you rather get us into trouble?"

"Hey, I've graduated high school. I'm grown up. Technically an adult. I'd rather you guys live a nice peaceful boring life while I'm gone."

"We'll try," Johnny said with a laugh.

"Hey, sorry we're late," Tommy said.

"We're not starting the going away sad stuff yet are we?" Jimmy asked.

"No of course not," Dutch said with a frown. "You guys just were so late that we got bored."

"Sure, this is what it normally looks like when we're late," Bobby said with a laugh.

"So where is Daniel?" Tommy asked.

"He's out with my mom, buying chocolate for White Day," Johnny said.

"What's that?"

"A holiday in Japan and Korea," Dutch said. "If you got candy on Valentine's Day or anything you're supposed to return it."

"When'd you learn that?" Jimmy asked.

"Chozen mentioned it," Dutch said.

"Since when do you hang out with Chozen on your own?" Tommy asked.

"Listen, y'all are away at UCLA, I'm taking care of everyone on the home front."

"You do realize you sound like a tired parent right?" Bobby asked with a soft laugh as the waitress came over and they ordered.

"It feels like that sometimes," Dutch said.

"I wouldn't have ever thought you'd try and take on that responsibility,"

"Why? Thought it'd be you?"

Bobby frowned looking at his straw, unwrapping one end and lifting it to his lips and blowing, sending the other half like a rocket at Dutch.

"I'm trying to enjoy being not in charge," he said with a grin.

"Oh, that's how we're playing it huh?" Dutch said letting go of Johnny's hand and grabbing one of the straws, quickly shooting his at Bobby who laughed and ducked out of the way, hitting Tommy instead.

It devolved quickly until Johnny grabbed the rest of the straws. Laughing as they turned on him, until the waitress returned, clearing her throat to warn them that their food was hot.

"Sorry ma'am," Bobby said, sitting up straight.

"Yeah we'll clean up," Tommy said.

She nodded, setting five new straws on the table before walking off.

"Right, where were we?" Jimmy asked carefully gathering up stray bits of straw paper.

"Dutch hangs out with Chozen without the rest of us."

"I'm trying to keep him out of trouble."

"He's been doing okay at that on his own though," Johnny said.

Dutch turned to look at him. "You think? Really?"

"Well...yeah. Hasn't he?"

"We took him to a hockey game and some bastards picked a fight with

him for no reason. We won that fight but Johnny, he's in a new country trying to make a fresh life for himself. It's not going to be easy. He needs support and Daniel's going to fight against him every step of the way. Which I get. I do. But I think Chozen's okay. He's trying and I think because of that he should be helped you know? Oh what's something Miyagi-like? Okay, think of him like a new plant. You're not going to get mad at a plant you moved and transplanted for not blooming immediately. You gotta take care of it and help it grow right? Keep away deer and shit that wants to eat it? Chozen's throwing all of himself into Miyagi-do. And I feel responsible for that okay? Like Miyagi-do is taking the place of Cobra Kai in the Valley, filling that void so something worse doesn't crop up. We could've, maybe, stood up to Kreese at some point and been like this is terrible and told someone about it and him and we didn't."

"We were kids," Bobby said.

"I know, but I still feel responsible. I don't want what happened to Johnny or Daniel to happen to anyone else. So I want Chozen to succeed. So if that means I'm checking in on him from time to time, which I'm going to blame Ms. Lawrence on-"

"My mom, why?" Johnny asked.

"Because she does that. She's fucking badass and she cares about people and she shows up and makes sure everyone is okay and when I grow up I want to be as cool as your mom. Right, so if you guys have to celebrate White Day to make him feel welcome I recommend it."

"Daniel hasn't complained about White Day to you yet has he?" Johnny asked amused.

"No. Why would he? You get gifts you give gifts back, what's wrong with that?"

"You give gifts back that are of equal value or time ," Johnny said. "And Chozen made me chocolates so I have to make him chocolates, and he bought Daniel nearly $200 worth of fancy chocolate. Daniel now has to find an equal amount of chocolate of nice quality for him or else it's rude. Not just to Chozen but also in Mr. Miyagi's eyes."

The table was quiet and then laughter erupted.

"That's possibly the best prank I've ever heard of."

"The sweetest revenge is literally chocolate."

"Genius."

"Sorry Johnny, I know this is like probably stressful for you and Daniel, but it's also ridiculous. I mean you went from karate to the death to fighting over who can give the better gift. I wish I got enemies like that."

"Right? Hell, maybe next year we should drown Chozen in fancy chocolates and see how he responds."

"He wouldn't be able to handle it, but his honor, man that'd be a delight."

"Someone make a note of that, we need that to happen, a reminder or something. Spoil Chozen on Valentine's Day and see what he does for White Day, because we could use that whole Miyagi thing to our own benefit."

"That's a little evil."

"Hey he's already doing it. Right? Sato and Yukie and Mr. Miyagi would make him return the favor. He's just tugging the string, and we'll pull that one next year."

"Before you all get down to your evil scheming, at least be helpful. What can I make?" Johnny said.

"We just got a whole bunch of bourbon in," Jimmy said thoughtfully.

"Bourbon? How's that going to help me?"

"Oh!" Bobby said turning towards Jimmy. Jimmy grinned shooting him a wink like he'd got it. "Bourbon balls."

"What the hell is a bourbon ball?" Dutch asked.

"You soak pecans in bourbon and they're kind of like truffles but not exactly," Bobby said. "You can come over and we can make some if you want."

"Bourbon and chocolate sounds like fun," Dutch said.

"You can come too." Bobby said.

"Good, because I am."

They finished their meal and made their way to Bobby's. Jimmy met

them there, after heading home to pick up bourbon. When he returned they set about following Bobby and Jimmy's somewhat different instructions for bourbon balls. Eventually just sitting and watching the two try and make their own.

"You gotta let the nuts soak," Jimmy said

"I can't believe you said that with a straight face," Dutch said with laugh.

"You just mix it all and let it bake," Bobby said with a frown.

"You ever been to Kentucky?" Jimmy asked Bobby.

"No, but-"

"Nuh uh. Sure sweets are you thing, but booze, I was touring bourbon distilleries at like five man, I know how this works."

"Let's just make our own and we'll see what happens," Bobby said.

Jimmy sighed and Dutch set out a glass in the middle between them.

"What's that for?" Bobby asked.

"I want to try the bourbon."

"Straight?"

"Best way to try it right?"

"Probably better if you have an ice cube at least."

"What? You don't think I can handle straight bourbon?" Dutch asked with a frown.

"I'm not saying you can't handle it," Jimmy said. "I'm just saying this shit's strong and honestly I'm tired of dragging your drunk asses around."

"What do you mean dragging us around?"

"You all are messy drunks okay? I don't want to clean up."

"Then drink with me," Dutch said.

Jimmy stared at him for a moment then sighed. "Fine get me another

glass."

"There we go, see it's not that we're messy drunks," Dutch said bumping his arm against Jimmy's fondly. "It's that you're tired of being left out. So drink with us. Isn't that what friends do?"

"Bobby?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Tommy?"

"I'll try it."

"Johnny?"

"I'll skip."

"Got a hot date?"

"Yes."

Dutch paused mid pour and burst out laughing. "You seriously made plans?"

"No," Johnny said taking his glass from Dutch and filling it water. "But anything can be a date."

"Like what?"

"Movie night at home can be a date, we borrowed some VHS's from the video store. Or we could play a card game, or play sanshin together or-"

"How is it possible," Dutch said turning to him, "That after all that time pining after Daniel in your stupid as fuck game of he doesn't like me back that was mutual but so so so dumb , that you managed to miss out on all the hot stuff and went straight into becoming an old man? What the hell Johnny? Like you know what, I'm not worried about you," Dutch said pointing at him with his index finger that was holding the bourbon filled glass. "You're excitement is a damn crossword puzzle at the moment."

"Hey," Johnny said.

"No, Johnny you're fucking 18. You spent all of your life doing what you've been told. Yes sir, no sir, sorry sir. You jumped when you were

told to. You took every fucking hit you weren't supposed to. Rebel man. Get out and do something fun. Grab Daniel and go to Hawaii or Las Vegas or Macaui. Like we know okay, we know that you're secretly a nerd who likes to wear soft sweaters and read a book. But you also kick ass, and it's like you're scared to kick ass again. Like you're scared that all of that kick ass Johnny was some evil monster, and I can tell you right now that's not true. Was our sweet little nerd the one who hot wired a car and drove Tommy to the hospital when he got stung by a jellyfish? Fuck no. That was our badass Johnny. You're both. But you're letting a side of yourself to die. Why?"

Dutch was leaning close studying Johnny close.

"Is this because I don't want the bourbon?" Johnny asked.

"No, I just...I'm worried."

"You just said you're not worried. You said you wanted me to have a peaceful boring life."

"I'm not worried that you'll get into trouble, I'm worried that you're torturing yourself in a new way."

"Maybe I'm..." Johnny studied his glass of ice. "enjoying just being. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah," Bobby said.

"What?" Dutch asked whirling towards him.

"Dutch, we all know that weight of expectation. In different ways. You know it pretty well right? What your parents want from you, what they expect?"

"Yeah," Dutch said with a frown.

"Isn't it nice sometimes to not have those expectations, or that weight?"

"I guess."

"Isn't that something you're looking forward to with going to Korea? You're not going to have to deal with your parents or their expectations or not having expectations right? You can just be. You can do what you want and you are doing what you want," Bobby said. "I think, sometimes, it's nice to just like float along. Let the river take

you where it's going. And Johnny, out of any of us, has spent so long fighting against that current, swimming harder because everyone's told him to, so if he wants to just float along for a while, he's kind of earned that right?"

Dutch frowned looking at his drink and at the other guys.

"If Johnny wants to be a grandpa type at 18 I think it's fine," Tommy said. "He deserves a rest."

"Yeah, besides, it's not like he's ignoring us for Daniel. He's here right? He's still showing up. I mean we had lunch last week. He came down to campus. He does that like every week," Jimmy said.

Bobby turned to study Dutch. "Don't tell me you out of all people who are still living in the area never see Johnny?"

"No, I do! We have lunch! We sometimes have breakfast. I mean having breakfast there with Louie is kind of weird. He stole my bacon last time."

"Sorry about that," Johnny said with a sigh. "He's struggling a little. I'm not sure if something bad happened back home. I guess he had to get out of the way or something. Daniel's having a hard time."

"I bet," Dutch said with a laugh. "I can only imagine how he's handling having a constant house guest after finally getting you to himself."

"What does that mean?" Johnny asked feeling his ears burn.

"I know just woken up Daniel and his dirty dirty mind. Remember we used to go on runs? Dude's like whole dream was moving in somewhere private to just have you to himself. I know more about his hopeful sex life with you then probably any one would every want to know."

"Seriously?" Jimmy asked with a laugh.

"Serious. When we all went running? Daniel just kept talking about Johnny's ass."

"Please change the topic," Johnny said flushing red.

"I thought his angry moments whenever we were there was just because we interrupted...and because it was a new relationship. Are you saying you think Daniel's just constantly on that level?"

"I think if you're a starving man and someone brings you the best tasting cake you've ever seen and then people keep coming over to talk to you and keep you from enjoying your cake you'd be pissed too," Dutch said with a laugh.

"Johnny's a tasty cake for Daniel?" Bobby asked with a laugh. "That's kind of cute."

"Oh, Bobby, you wouldn't last a minute with Daniel talking early in the morning about Johnny."

"What do you mean? You don't think I can handle dirty talk?" Bobby asked.

"I think maybe you're a little vanilla for Daniel."

"Excuse you, I could last a half hour listening to him talk about Johnny," Bobby said pointing the whisk he was using at Dutch.

"Like to see you try,"

"Well then let's make that a challenge. We'll all meet up with Daniel early in the morning and compare notes and see how it goes. Johnny you think he's free for early morning coffee tomorrow?"

"What is happening?" Johnny complained.

"You know sometimes people talk to their friends about their sex lives. You don't. So we'll talk to Daniel instead," Tommy said with a teasing smile.

"You ever think maybe I don't want you to know that stuff about me?" Johnny asked, feeling his skin burn.

Who knew what Daniel would say. If that filter wasn't there, if they talked to him in the morning even a little about Johnny then, then, it'd be too much.

"Wow, you're as red as a tomato," Jimmy said.

"We're teasing," Tommy said. "You're allowed your privacy."

"You really think Daniel would go into detail?" Bobby asked with a frown.

"He really just complimented your ass for a half hour," Dutch said. He walked over with his bourbon and sat next to Johnny. "It was more

detail then I expected. But it wasn't, you know, detailed detailed."

Johnny drank his water, trying to will the blush away.

He should punch them.

But he didn't feel that anger he used to feel, that desire to snap back. Maybe Dutch was right. Maybe all his fight was gone. He didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

He was tired.

He was tired of fighting and he just liked his quiet domestic life with Daniel.

Maybe it'd be good if he told Dutch how much that quiet domestic life meant to him. He was still working on understanding it. But maybe...maybe he hadn't really talked to the guys about that side of himself.

About his past.

They knew, but they never asked.

And that's what they wanted.

The teasing was because he wasn't putting his walls down. So they went for the easy shot.

He looked down at the water held in both of his hands.

"I spent so long not having a place to really called home. I really am just enjoying having that. The mansion wasn't a home. It was...a place I didn't ever feel comfortable. I took short showers and barely slept so I could sneak out the window if I needed to. I locked my doors but listened for the sound of footsteps towards my door. And before that...mom and I lived in our car. And that was it. We didn't have a bathroom of our own. We didn't have our own shower. I'd run into the ocean as a kid to like rinse off. I have no clue what mom did. How she got by. We didn't have a kitchen. We didn't have a TV. Or a couch that we could just chill on and watch TV.

“When we lived with Mr. Miyagi, it was nice, and it was peaceful but it was also destroyed by Silver and Barnes. They broke in and I couldn't sleep because I was worried that I'd sleep through something. That they'd come back and I wanted to be prepared.

“But now. Now I have a couch I can sit on and watch TV or movies with Daniel and there's a microwave we cook popcorn in. There's a stove and an oven and a fridge. All these things I didn't have for a good chunk of my childhood. Or that I couldn't use because they weren't mine. And these aren't...mine. They're ours . And I'm like, relaxing.

“I'm enjoying long showers and not worrying about every little sound because if the door opens its one of you idiots coming in to raid our fridge or it's Louie snoring on the couch or it's Daniel moving around and things are nice and they're safe and I'm not as...tightly coiled? I'm not stressed or at least not the same way.

“It feels like this big weight on my shoulders, cinder blocks that I've been walking with around my feet, it’s all just gone and I'm enjoying not having to answer anyone. Not having to make decisions beyond what do I want for dinner and actually being able to make that choice. Not being given food I hate or just having to eat what we have. If there's nothing I want to eat in the house we can eat out or we can go somewhere else, or Daniel will think up something I hadn't ever heard of that he thinks I might like or I might think of something and I can cook it. So if I'm an old grandpa at 18 because of it, I think I'm okay with that."

Johnny looked up, around at the guys, at the quiet of the kitchen.

Dutch set his bourbon down, his eyes were filled with tears which was a look Johnny didn't see too much and then Johnny was pulled into a hug, a tight one, where Dutch rested his head on top of Johnny's.

"I'm so sorry Johnny. You enjoy that nice stuff okay? I'm sorry for not thinking. But you're right."

Johnny heard him sniff.

"You enjoy all that nice domestic stuff."

It felt like Dutch was trying to squeeze the life out of him, but after the shock of it, Johnny sighed and hugged him back.

"What I'm trying to say, is that I'm going to be okay I think. And it's mostly because of you guys and Daniel and Mr. Miyagi."

"Johnny," Bobby said softly and Johnny shut his eyes.

He didn't want to see the tears he could hear in Bobby's voice. If they

were all crying again, he couldn't handle it.

He'd cry more. And that hadn't been the plan. He'd planned to just enjoy a night with his friends.

"Man he really didn't want us talking to Daniel about sex huh?" Bobby said with a watery laugh. "You pulled out the big guns on us."

Johnny felt a hand on his back soothingly rubbing it. He felt grateful that they were there. That he had them, that they'd found one another. As he was hugged, as he was held. He wasn't alone and he hoped they knew that too. That across the ocean or just in a dorm a half hour away or wherever they went that he'd be there.

He just also wanted to spend time at home doing stuff he never got to do. Like feel comfortable making popcorn. The popping once had been too loud, it took too long. But it was nice to just enjoy it with Daniel. To not have to think about it. Or like the several first movie nights where he just stared at the box of popcorn that Daniel had bought. The way he'd almost said no when Daniel asked if he wanted some because it was too loud, but then realized that didn't matter anymore.

And it was the gentle smile Daniel gave him with the bowl of popcorn and telling him really they could have it whenever he wanted, and how Daniel had teasingly thrown a piece at him, unhurried, unworried about the mess, playing and at ease by his side. And he was trying to play back and it was fun and he didn't mind the mess. Johnny had enjoyed the games they played. Stuff he hadn't gotten to do before at places he was told were home but hadn't felt like it.

And maybe...maybe that was sad. If he said it all. If he said he didn't get to just have fun unless it was with the guys. That when he left their homes it wasn't the same. When their nights out were over they went home but for him it hadn't been to a nice warm home that he returned to. It'd just been uncomfortable and he'd avoided it. Putting it off, biking around, walking around, driving around, sitting on the beach and watching the waves.

But now he liked going home. He liked throwing popcorn at Daniel, liked trying to catch the popcorn Daniel threw at him in his mouth. Pleased when either managed it. Dumb things. But he loved them.

Maybe it was why he loved the bonsai so much. Because it was something he got to hold, a gift given to him that was an actual gift. Something someone gave him with a bit of trust and hope in him. And

he'd done it. He'd kept it alive and it was thriving. It never had to visit the little bonsai hospital they had set up at the shop.

And maybe thriving wasn't something Johnny would say he himself was doing, but he was better. He wasn't as burdened. He wasn't struggling as hard as he had been. He was learning how to just live without jumping at every sound, anticipating what he had to do to retaliate or to head it off or to strike first.

"You deserve to enjoy nice things," Tommy said. "Not just basic things. But you'll get there. And maybe we'll still talk to Daniel, but that's because we like talking to Daniel."

"Yeah who knew that annoying punk you fought on the beach would be one of our favorite people," Dutch said with a soft laugh.

"We like him because he helped you. Because he makes you happy and better."

“And just because he’s him.”

"Stubborn little bastard sometimes, but like in the best way."

"How did shopping with my mom go?" Johnny asked setting down his boxes of bourbon balls and the supplies to make more.

"Exhausting. Who knew there were so many different chocolate makers in LA and the surrounding area? But I think I've figured out what I'm giving Chozen. How are the guys?"

"Good, they’re going to be hungover at the Browns though."

"I thought you guys were going out for dinner," Daniel said. "Though that explains why you smell so sweet."

"You want to try some?" Johnny asked opening up one of the boxes.

"Yes. But first I think we should get this over with right? White Day's the 14th. Let's drop off our gifts early."

"But it's late," Johnny said.

"True. Okay, tomorrow then."

"Before you go to school or during lunch? Or in the evening?" Johnny

asked.

Daniel frowned chewing on his lip and then turning to Louie.

"Hey Louie?"

"Yeah?"

"You want to have dinner with Chozen tomorrow?"

"What?" Louie asked from the couch.

"I agree with Louie on that one, what are you talking about?" Johnny asked.

Daniel leaned forward, voice dropped low so Louie wouldn't hear.

"Mr. Miyagi and Sato are taking Yukie out for dinner right? How about we invite Chozen here? Louie and I make dinner, we give him his chocolates? Mr. Miyagi will be happy Chozen didn't spend the night alone. Really everyone will. And with luck we can get the two of them out of the house and have the apartment to ourselves."

"So you're goal here," Johnny said softly, matching Daniels quiet tone, "Is to get rid of both Louie and Chozen tomorrow night by explicitly inviting them both over for dinner?"

"Yeah. We have dinner and then send them out to the movies. Louie's been talking about this movie he wants to see. I don't really want to see it and Chozen's got nothing better to do. It'll be the most expensive movie I ever paid for but I feel like I gotta get something back out of spending over $200 on chocolates. He owes me."

Johnny laughed softly shaking his head. "So you're secretly hiring Chozen to be a babysitter for Louie? Seriously?"

"Why not?"

"He actually does have better things to do you know? The dojo is supposed to have its soft opening soon. He's got the actual government coming to check in on the dojo."

Daniel's demeanor sort of deflated. "What really? Who told you that?"

"The guys told me."

"Well then it'll be a nice break for him."

"Something you don't want to do though," Johnny said carefully putting the chocolates in the fridge.

"Can you blame me?"

"I don't know how to answer that," Johnny said.

"Let me rephrase that," Daniel said stepping in close and pressing up behind Johnny.

Johnny tried to focus on the contents of their fridge. What could possibly be made for a White Day dinner from the condiments and sauces, and leftovers. They'd need to go to the grocery.

It wasn't a good enough distraction from the warmth behind him, the hand that found it's way under his shirt.

"Wait so why's Chozen coming over for dinner tomorrow?" Louie asked a little closer then he had been, meaning he'd moved.

Johnny quickly shut the fridge, trying to keep a regular expression on his face.

"Tomorrow's White Day, it's like Valentine's Day part two in Japan and Korea."

"But Chozen's from Okinawa," Louie said setting his soda on the counter, folding his arms across his chest.

"Well he still celebrates it," Daniel said pulling away ever so slightly. "Chozen gave us gifts so we got him gifts and since the rest of his household has plans, we thought it'd be nice for him to come here."

"Really?" Louie asked suspiciously. "Because you don't like Chozen, you said he's just after Johnny's-"

"It'll be fine!" Daniel said loudly letting go of Johnny completely and swatting at Louie. "So you want to make dinner with me?"

" Again ? Why are we always cooking? I heard you guys usually do take out or like eat with Mr. Miyagi. I cook more here then at home."

"You can never be too young to learn healthy habits. Besides Johnny already ate."

"What are you an after school special?"

"Well we're cooking today and tomorrow, so think of what we should make for dinner tomorrow and let's get to work on tonight."

"Is this a punishment? I didn't know you didn't want him to know? I figured you've mentioned it."

"Come on Louie wash your hands and lets get to work."

Louie groaned but did as he was told shooting Johnny a look, a plea of rescue, but Johnny just carefully stepped aside heading off to grab his book and curl up on the couch to read.

Chozen set a cup of coffee down on the counter for Johnny. It was from the cafe between the dojo and the shop but on the way from Mr. Miyagi's. Chozen always went there, almost like clock work, on his way to the dojo he'd stop and he'd get coffee and bring it over. He'd talk for a little bit and then head out.

Except if he saw Louie. Lately he dropped off the coffee, greeted Johnny and left. But Louie was out with Daniel grocery shopping and planning dinner.

It was good coffee and Johnny wondered if he was being spoiled. But it wasn't just him. He brought stuff for Mr. Miyagi too.

"What are you doing tonight?" Johnny asked.

Chozen who'd started to open his mouth, closed it, looking a little surprised.

"I suppose it's best to say what for before you give your answer," Johnny said quickly. "So you can say you're busy if you are. Daniel and Louie are making dinner and we thought you might like to come over and eat with us."

"Me?" Chozen asked.

Johnny laughed softly, smiling. "Yeah you."

"Yes," Chozen said. "What time?"

"Six, is that okay?" Johnny asked.

"I will be there," Chozen said, reaching out and patting Johnny's hand, then looking at the clock. "Ah, have to go to the dojo."

"I hope it goes well," Johnny said. "You can tell us about it at dinner."

Chozen nodded, saying a quick goodbye to Mr. Miyagi and hurrying out the door.

"Dinner sounds like event," Mr. Miyagi said as he worked on one of his bonsai.

"It was Daniel's idea," Johnny said. "But I hope it goes well and that Chozen enjoys it. I don't know what they're making."

"Glad boys are getting along," Mr. Miyagi said with a nod. "Important since lives are, intertwined."

Johnny kept offering to help but he was banished to the living room to read. Hosting duties, which hadn't started yet since Louie was helping Daniel cook and Chozen wasn't expected yet for hours.

He'd finished his book, he'd cleaned, he'd worked out, he'd showered and dressed nicely. Now he was reading another book and trying not to ask every five minutes if they were sure they didn't want help.

Louie looked like he wanted nothing more than to escape but every time he lost focus Daniel gave him a gentle whack with with the spoon he was using.

Johnny didn't even know what they were making. He was given a look every time he got close to the kitchen. A quick excuse of You cooked for Valentine's Day. or Louie's got to learn.

Louie had a lot of cooking to learn apparently. Daniel was determined, utterly fully completely determined that Louie would know how to cook anything and everything by the time he left their apartment.

Johnny wasn't sure if it was to make sure he could take care of himself or punishment for crashing with them. It seemed to be a bit of both. Especially since Louie complained but made no move towards going home or talking to them about whey he'd left in the first place.

Mr. Miyagi had seemed excited when Sato came to pick him up. They'd chatted about their dinner plans in Okinawan and Sato had patted Johnny's shoulder.

Thank you.

Huh?

Invite nephew. Know Daniel-san not....like. But appreciate. Share thanks.

Johnny didn't know what to do but nod. It seemed weird to say that the whole thing was a ruse, a gamble to get Louie out for hours. The truth to it was that Daniel wanted to have sex. And Johnny was trying not to think about it. He was trying not to get his hopes up. Let it roll up on him like a surprise. Focus on the trees, on getting home, on picking up the wine Daniel had asked him to get.

But it had been a while since they'd had the apartment to themselves and he kept catching himself and forcing himself to stop thinking about it, turning mentally back around and going back to safer topics. Not Daniel's soft lips or warm skin. The way they felt intertwined.

"Johnny?" Daniel asked.

Johnny looked up from his book, Daniel was smiling, leaning over the back of the couch and gave him a kiss.

"Dinner's almost done. Chozen should be here soon."

Johnny nodded putting away his book.

He set the table and then when there was a knock at the door went to get it. Chozen was dressed nicely, and he seemed surprised at how quickly Johnny had opened the door.

"Come on in," Johnny said. "Daniel said dinner's almost done."

"Thank you," Chozen said leaving his shoes at the door. "Um, I brought flowers."

Johnny took a bouquet of sunflowers and smiled, "Chozen, aren't we supposed to be giving you things?"

"I couldn't pass them up, they seemed like they belonged here," Chozen said.

"Well I'll put them in water, thank you Chozen," Johnny said getting a vase his mother picked out a while back for him and filling it up with water.

He carefully unwrapped the flowers studying the stems trying to determine if they needed to be trimmed before placing them in the water and setting them on the coffee table. It seemed the safest as the dining table filled up with food.

“Louie you’ve met Chozen right?” Daniel asked.

“Yeah at Mr. Miyagi’s shop.”

“Nice to meet you again.”

"You taught in Okinawa?" Louie asked.

"Yes."

"Kids?"

"Military."

"Oh. Right. I knew that. How do you fight military men?"

Chozen studied Louie confused, trying to figure out the point to the questions. "The way you fight anyone."

"No but it's got to be harder right? Military guys? I mean you look at them right?" He waved a hand towards Daniel and Johnny. "You'd think Johnny would win every fight. But Daniel uses that Okinawan style and he won. But you also use that and Daniel won again. So I'm wondering if you know the secret to it."

Chozen dug into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out a business card, he hesitated a moment before holding it out. "Come, learn for yourself."

"Seriously?" Louie asked taking the card. He turned to Daniel. "Can I?"

"That might've been a mistake," Johnny said softly to Chozen as Louie showed Daniel the card.

"Ah, yes, I have been...played," Chozen said. "Expected different response. Didn’t realize he was fishing and I was fish."

"Dinner is ready," Daniel said after nudging Louie with is elbow. Louie sighed sticking the business card in his back pocket and helped carry food out to the table. "Lemon chicken piccata."

"Have you had much Italian food?" Louie asked Chozen, taking his

plate and filling it up with noodles and chicken and capers.

"Uh, no, not as much. We have restaurants but often I ate at home. Or American food."

"What like burgers?"

"Yes, or steak or seafood."

"Steaks good. So these are capers, they're not peas, Daniel made sure I knew that, kept shaking the bottle at me and saying ‘Louie these are are capers, don't get them mistaken with peas, peas have a vastly different flavor profile.’ And then he made me eat one. They're not...well they're good, but I don't like them on their own. Salty. I mean I’ve had them before on Lox, but by themselves is a bit much. Oh and this, we made a salad too. Daniel said we needed vegetables and I guess we had to be like a damn Olive Garden, so we made a salad. Have you ever been to an Olive Garden? I think they opened a few years ago and they're just everywhere now. Italian food but like a chain.

“Anyway salads are awful to make because you have to rinse off everything. You have to wash so much stuff. Every leaf, every tomato. I suppose I should be happy I didn't have to wash off the croutons or the cheese. But it's so much washing. And then everything is all soaking wet and you have to dry it. Why can't they just sell it like that? I mean they do. They sell those ready made salad packets, but it's cheaper to buy the actual head of lettuce, which that's weird right? "head" of lettuce. Why? But yeah, you have to wash everything and then dry it off and then cut it. I hate making salads. You'd think it'd be easy right? It's just vegetables. But I swear, drying the leaves are such a pain.

“Oh and then we made bread and pasta. Because for some reason Daniel's got it in his head that no one's teaching me the way Nonnia cooks. Like the old country or whatever. So those right there are handmade noodles. Which is ridiculous because you can get the same noodles for like a buck at the grocery store and not spend hours making them. You have to like feed the dough through a machine very carefully and you get just absolutely covered in flour. Same with the bread. But at least with the bread you get to punch it a little. Hey, you're a...sensei. You punch a lot of people? I mean other than my cousin. Like did you get into a lot of fights in Okinawa? Have you gotten to fight anyone here?"

Chozen blinked. The only tell that he was overwhelmed by the LaRusso's chatty nature. "I got into a fight with Cobras."

"You fought the cobras?"

"No. Strangers. At hockey game."

Louie nodded like that was the only logical choice, a common occurrence at any sporting event. "Did you win?"

"We won, yes. And I got into fights in Okinawa until I was too strong to pick a fight with. Then only new unaware military pick fight."

"Ah, so you're a notorious figure in Okinawa?"

"I suppose."

Johnny met Daniel's eyes. They were on him, watching him, dark. He knew that look now. Knew that Daniel wasn't paying attention to the conversation, that he was lost in some daydream. Johnny looked away quickly feeling his ears burn. If he wasn't careful he'd fall into the same trap and he'd been doing so good throughout the day to avoid the thoughts, the same quick spiral.

"-so it's really supposed to be a fun movie. Daniel won't see it with me and Johnny, well it's a set you know? Take one you gotta take the other. But I apparently can't go wandering off in LA by myself. Even though I can definitely take care of myself."

Ah, he was laying the ground work on his own. For the movie. Maybe they'd make plans together without Daniel or Johnny having to do anything. Life couldn't be that easy could it?

Daniel was filling plates with food and smiling to himself, pleased. Louie was explaining the movie and Daniel looked at Johnny passing him his food, his eyes holding so much promise.

It'd been a while since they'd had time to themselves and every look Daniel gave him was electric. The gentle touch of caress of his fingers when he handed him the plate, where he went out of his way to touch him, for a moment too long, sent a shiver down his spine.

"Have you ever been to a theater in the states?" Louie asked.

"No, not yet," Chozen said.

"Then we have to go. You have to get all the snacks too."

"I think this is filling," Chozen said motioning to the food.

"But it makes the experience you know? Like okay, have you had an Icee?"

"An icy?"

"It's like a snow-cone, flavored ice but a drink," Johnny said.

"See? you gotta try it."

Chozen was listening and Johnny ate his food. It was good. But that wasn't a surprise. Everything Daniel made was delicious.

"What did you do for White Day in Okinawa?"

"Nothing really," Chozen said.

Daniel tensed, the spark of anger shooting through him.

Johnny shifted, catching one of Daniel's legs between his and giving it a gentle squeeze in the hopes it'd calm him down a little.

"Seriously?" Louie asked.

"Not like Kumiko," Chozen said softly rolling his fork to collect noodles on it. "She gave chocolates out to almost everyone for Valentine's Day and it was easy. They'd come back to her too, on White Day. But she always avoided me. And other kids didn't share with me either. I wasn't particularly popular and I was…grumpy so they avoided me. My friends shared theirs, but, I never gave out White day chocolates. I tried to do Valentine's Day for Uncle one year when I was little, since it was just us and all the other kids were doing it. Their families seemed happy about it. And Uncle said it was a waste of time."

Chosen set his fork down and took a sip of his water.

"The only one who celebrated with me was Miyagi-sensei. He started it. Gave me Valentine's Day candy, so I made sure to celebrate White Day with him. He was always delighted by it. This is...my first year without him, not celebrating with him. So...thank you for celebrating with me."

His voice sounded a little watery.

"Of course," Johnny said gently patting his arm.

"Well that does it, we have to go to the movies! This can't be it for your night. We need to do something fun! And a movie with fighting and things exploding is perfect."

Louie turned from Chozen to Daniel, big puppy dog eyes.

Daniel knocked his knee gently against Johnny's and Johnny let go. "You should go to the nice theater."

"Seriously?" Louie asked, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice.

"I trust Chozen to keep you safe. But you gotta behave. Best behavior."

"I will!"

"Speaking of White Day," Daniel said getting up.

Ah, now.

Johnny got up as well.

His chocolates were in the fridge.

He carefully got them out while Daniel handed his fancy bag to Chozen.

Chozen took it with wide eyes.

"Daniel spent weeks trying to figure out the best chocolates to get you. He had to call in reinforcements," Louie said.

Daniel smacked him gently before sitting down again.

"What? It's the truth."

"Don't you dare take any of his chocolates, those are for him."

"But, you both got him so much!"

"You can make do with theater candy."

"Unfair."

Johnny held the box out to Chozen who looked up from his bag of chocolates and then reached for Johnny's box with both hands, fingers brushing his.

"They've got a little bit of alcohol in them. I made them with some bourbon, if you like it, let Jimmy know he can easily get you a bottle," Johnny said.

"I- thank you both. I thought dinner was my gift, I wasn't expecting-"

Chozen looked a little overwhelmed. It was probably harder than they expected. Who knew how many sudden pitfalls lay ahead? How many other traditions that hadn't seemed like much would suddenly hit like a brick wall once they rolled around?

Johnny glanced at Daniel, he probably knew. Knew how hard it was to be suddenly without a person you cared so much for. That heavy and inexplicable burden of grief

"Dinner's from me," Louie said quickly earning another smack from Daniel. "What? I did most of the work and you just supervised and nitpicked."

"I don't have something for you."

"The movie will do it. And put me on your list next year," Louie said with a grin.

"I will," Chozen said softly.

"If we're discussing next year, make me something simple next time will you? A cake or something. I'll make you something in return. We've got some good family recipes. It'd be a good excuse to make it," Daniel said.

He was giving off an air as if he didn't care. Like what he was saying was flippant. But Johnny knew it was a desperate bid to not have to drop another $200 or more on chocolates.

"Ah, Bobby offered to teach me how to make western sweets. I have nearly a year to train with him to make something then," Chozen said thoughtfully.

It was the subtlest twitch in Daniel's face, the tightness of his jaw. The implication that next February he'd be given some unknown highly time intensive sweet and would have to best it. A new battle a year away, the gauntlet thrown down innocently. Johnny could read the curses balancing on Daniel's tongue in his face.

"The Browns house is a lot of creative chaos. I hope you enjoy it,"

Johnny said with a warm smile as they settled back down to their meal.

He felt something brush his leg, pressing against his thigh. He pushed Daniel's foot away. He was not going to take his annoyance and shift it to bothering Johnny. Dinner was almost over. They were almost in the clear. He could hang in there just a little longer before Louie dragged Chozen off to the movies. And then, then the silent promise could be met with lips on one another, hands on skin, touch starved, but only in such a very specific way.

They just had to wait, they just had to get through finishing up dinner and waving Chozen and Louie off. They just had to wait. But Daniel was frustrated and since politeness wouldn't allow him to snap or vent his frustration at the budding relationship he had with Chozen, he was focused on playing with Johnny.

Johnny managed to get some conversation going, to talk about karate, Okinawa, and Kumiko. But eventually Louie got antsy, the food was finished and he was spouting out show times he'd memorized, and how long it'd take to get there and he was tugging Chozen out the door, who promised to bring him back safe before midnight and thanking them for dinner and the gifts.

The door shut and Daniel pushed back his chair.

"I can't believe that worked," Johnny said staring at the door.

"I can't believe that bastard is going to outdo me in baking. You heard that right? This is going to become a yearly nightmare."

"He misses Miyagi Sensei," Johnny said standing up and carrying his plate to the sink.

"He might miss Miyagi sensei but there's no need to challenge me . Buy me a Kitkat or something. But fine, if he wants to challenge me then I'll kick his ass. Again!"

Johnny put his hand on Daniel's shoulder and kissed his cheek. "Of course you will."

Daniel spun towards Johnny, grabbing his shirt and pulling him into a kiss, pushing his tongue into Johnny's mouth.

When he pulled away he looked just a little calmer.

"You know he'll probably do the same thing to you."

"Huh?"

"Make you something fancy. If you're bothered by it you should speak up."

Johnny turned, cleared the dining room table, heading to the sink to start washing pots and pans. "I appreciate his effort."

"You appreciate his effort," Daniel repeated with a frown, hand sliding into Johnny's back pocket. "What about my effort?"

"You are amazing," Johnny said leaning over and kissing the tip of Daniel's nose. "Now let me focus, you had plans tonight. Let me clean up so we can get on that."

Daniel sighed wrapping his arms around Johnny's waist and pressing up against him Johnny could feel his head pressed to his back. "Amazing huh?" His hands moved, slipping under Johnny's shirt and running up, along his torso and then to his chest. "You're the one whose amazing. So tonight...I've got goals."

"What kind of goals?"

"You'll see," Daniel said rubbing the tips of his fingers over Johnny's nipple and pinching it. There was no escape. Daniel had him pinned between him and the sink.

"Let me finish these up," Johnny said.

"Not stopping you," Daniel said one of his hands moving down, pulling away just enough to give himself the room to pull Johnny back and to slip his hand down the front of Johnny's jeans.

"No, but you're making this difficult."

"Ah, you can't wash dishes while I touch you?"

"It's not simply touching is it?" Johnny asked. Daniel was rolling his hips against him.

"I'd say this counts as touching, or barely, you can't be mad about this," Daniel said.

"I don't think you realize how absolutely unpleasant this is."

"How is it unpleasant?" Daniel asked.

"You've pulled my shirt up, I'm getting soapy water all over myself."

"Hot."

"Don't act like this wasn't your plan all along."

"Lucky accident," Daniel said.

"So what's the plan?" Johnny asked finishing up the final pan and twisting towards Daniel and wrapping his arms around him.

"Step one, naked," Daniel said tugging at Johnny's clothes, helping him out of them. "You're up for anything right?"

"Yes," Johnny said kissing him.

"Perfect," Daniel said moving them around. "The table then."

Johnny had said yes, but Daniel had also told him repeatedly if something bothered him to complain. To complain more often. He wanted to continue and really it was nothing. But-

"Daniel I-"

"What is it?" Daniel asked pulling away, taking that warmth with him.

They didn't have a lot of time, they'd already lost a bunch on clean up after dinner and to complain seemed-Daniel put his hands on either side of Johnny's face.

He was waiting, but just barely.

Johnny had to speak. It felt so trivial but-

"You said to complain more often."

"You want to complain?" Daniel asked.

There was a hint of amusement in his tone, curiosity, a press of his thigh between Johnny's legs, reminding him of where this was going.

"It's going to be cold," Johnny said quickly before he could swallow his complaint down.

Daniel blinked, slipping an arm past Johnny to the table behind him,

palm pressing onto the cold surface. He had a thoughtful look on his face.

"Easy fix," Daniel said after a moment.

Johnny nodded wondering if they'd go elsewhere. He wasn't sure exactly what the fascination was with their dining room table. They could go to their bedroom, the floor, the-

Daniel was getting out a table cloth.

"It's kind of like a blanket," Daniel said thoughtfully spreading the table cloth over their table, carefully. Then patting the table cloth with a sit here tapping.

"What am I a meal?" Johnny asked.

"Now that's a thought. Maybe I'll go get those chocolates you made leftovers of. I can melt a couple and-"

"Do we have time?" Johnny asked moving to sit on the table.

They were going to have to destroy the table. They'd have to buy a new one. Burn the table cloth. He'd never be able to look at it the same way again.

Daniel turned and glanced at the clock and then smiled back at Johnny. "It's like a two and a half hour movie, they're not watching it at the nearby theater they've gone closer to the nice fancy theater further away. We've got plenty of time to take this slow ."

Slow.

Johnny wasn't sure if he'd be able to handle that. Ever since Louie had showed up on their doorstep it'd been hard for them to find time to themselves. Everything was fast, stolen moments when they were lucky.

Daniel was working so hard at his apprenticeship that it felt like their time together, their alone time specifically was few and far between. So Johnny understood why Daniel wanted to savor the moment, why he'd bolted the door and had stuck a chair against the door to keep anyone out. Like a barricade that felt silly but also one hundred percent serious.

He just wasn't sure he'd last. It'd seemed like it was going to go fast,

immediate gratification and satisfaction and now he felt a little too exposed sitting on the kitchen table. Sure it wasn't as cold as he'd expected but it was strange. He tried to find a comfortable position while Daniel got out his chocolates.

"Hey Daniel," Johnny said sitting up suddenly as he remembered what was in them.

"Yeah?"

"Those can't go in the microwave, there's alcohol in them."

"You think they'll catch fire?" Daniel asked.

"I think I really do not want to chance that right now."

"Right," Daniel said looking down at the bowl of chocolates Johnny had made and set them next to Johnny. "I guess I did buy some chocolates while I was out with your mom, I'll melt those."

"They don't have gold flakes or any alcohol in them do they?" Johnny asked, leaning against his knee, amused.

"Hey, I'm not going to make the same mistake twice," Daniel said. "It's cheap plain chocolate."

Johnny nodded picking up one of the bourbon chocolates and taking a bite. They had turned out well, there was still a slight bite of bourbon to them, but not enough to do much.

Daniel removed the microwaved chocolate and set it aside looking at Johnny.

"Is this just a staring thing?" Johnny asked taking another bite. "Cause you could just watch me shower if that's the goal."

Daniel laughed softly. "Some day. Some day I will just enjoy that show."

"You'll have to hurry or else I'm going to charge an entrance fee."

"An entrance fee to watch you shower? How much is that going to cost?"

Johnny finished the bourbon ball thoughtfully. "I'll give you two options."

"Oh, I get two huh?" Daniel asked hand on Johnny's knee. "What are my two options?"

"Well you can add to your kissing debt but I will take kisses in payment while showering. So the needle wouldn't move too much."

Daniel smiled nodding, applying a gentle pressure, carefully pushing Johnny's legs apart. "And if I want to completely just watch and not participate?"

"I'd ask if you were sick," Johnny said amused. "I thought you said this was going to be slow."

"It is," Daniel said, pressing a kiss against his inner thigh. "You haven't said how much the show would cost."

"I thought you'd go for kisses. I didn't really think that far ahead."

"How about when you finish your shower I give you a blow job?"

"I-wh-"

Daniel smiled looking way to pleased at Johnny's speechless expression kissing his hip and moving up onto the table and kissing Johnny.

"You should ask for more," Daniel said. "Think of things you actually want. I will kiss you, I will kiss you so many times throughout your life that you'll lose track and I'll lose track, though I haven't yet. You have spent so much time wanting so little. There's got to be things you actually want. I know it's a lot," Daniel said as Johnny sunk down to his forearms looking up at Daniel who dipped his index into the chocolate and ran his finger over Johnny's shoulder.

"I ask you to complain and you did. You spoke up. I wouldn't have realized until I got up here too that it was cold. And that's great. But you should also do what you want. Ask for what you want. I want to spoil you. Can you believe that? I do. In a bunch of different ways. I'm not where I want to be yet to do everything, but I will get there. And when I do, you will not know what to do with yourself."

He drew a heart on Johnny's chest, then dipped his finger again, continuing his doodles.

"I want to make love to you on this table. Slow and languid until neither of us can handle it. I want to enjoy every moment we've got.

And I have a feeling this chocolate's probably not going to feel so great later so we can take that shower together. And I have a feeling after so long I might get a second wind. Maybe a third. Maybe five. Who knows. Let's go at it like rabbits huh? That's what I want to do. How about you?"

Daniel's gaze rose from his designs, his little sketches.

Johnny pushed himself up grabbing Daniel's wrist, dragging his tongue along Daniel's finger.

Daniel's focus remained on his lips, watching his finger disappear into Johnny's mouth.

A tiny revenge. A tiny re-do. A chance to turn the tables from that one night nearly a year ago at the lodge. Maybe it wasn't whipped cream, maybe it wasn't exactly the same but the look on Daniel's face was worth it. Whatever he'd been using to keep himself calm, steady started to crumble. He looked like he wanted to say something. But what exactly just wasn't connecting. And Johnny smirked up at him, carefully letting go of Daniel's finger.

"Sounds good to me," Johnny said, brushing his hair back and out of his face.

He knew, knew that movement would draw attention, a movement of muscle that showed off just a little, that the nonchalant tone as if they were deciding what to do for the day rather than a go for it green light.

Daniel stared at him, and Johnny waited for his brain to start up again. Waited for the synapses to fire again, gently bumping his leg against Daniel's hip. While it wasn't as cold as it could be, it still would be better if the ball got rolling. If he wasn't awkwardly on the kitchen table. Dining room table? They didn't really have a separate room. It was cozier like that. But maybe one day. After all if everyone they loved came to visit they'd need a bigger table. Because this one was going to get chopped up and burned. Never to be sat at again.

Daniel lunged forward, a sudden movement kissing him and catching him off guard that Johnny lost his balance, slipping back.

Daniel's hand was on the back of his head, keeping it from hitting the table.

Johnny grabbed the front of Daniel's shirt and tugged. Pulling at it.

Daniel pulled away from his kiss, getting the hint, taking off his shirt throwing it off towards the living room, letting it disappear into a sea of darkness beyond their little space together. He pressed his lips against Johnny's neck, then his collar bone, working his way towards the chocolate, looking up at Johnny as he dragged his tongue along his skin.

Johnny tried to press his hips up against Daniel and Daniel smiled but made no move to help or to move his focus. He'd thought he'd sped things up but Daniel seemed determined to keep moving slowly. There were parts of him that he never thought had been particularly sensitive. That he hadn't really paid much attention to that Daniel seemed to pay close attention to, to lavish his affection on and Johnny wasn't sure if that's what got him or if Daniel had kindled something new. Or if it was the idea or just knowing that Daniel seemed to be so into whatever he was doing.

He shivered, wondering what to do, he needed to do something. Daniel wanted slow, so he needed a distraction. He went with Daniel's hair, touching it, playing with it the way Daniel sometimes did with his own.

He tried to focus on something else.

Maybe he could try and talk?

The quiet, the focus would get to him. Not the same way it used to. It didn't make him as uncomfortable, not in the same way. Not in a worried way, but in an overwhelming way. Knowing Daniel was so wound up that he was quiet, and zero'd in on Johnny.

"Why the kitchen table?" Johnny asked, after clearing his throat.

Daniel pushed back, looking at Johnny thoughtfully then going to their cabinet and getting a small colorful container out.

Johnny stared at him.

"It's what I wanted to do when Louie showed up. I got all riled up for it. And now it's stuck. An itch I need to get out of my system."

"And the sprinkles? The chocolate isn't enough sugar?"

"You made your own chocolates," Daniel said motioning towards the bourbon balls. "I'm making my own."

"Why did this turn into a crafting project?"

"Well you said I could do what I wanted for White Day right?"

"I guess?"

"This is what I want. At least to try it. I think it'll be pretty."

Johnny slumped back on the table. They really were going to go slow. He felt the pieces of sugar fall and watched Daniel and sighed. "Okay Mr. art's project, is this a fine pose for whatever you're working on or do I need to move?"

"Hmm," Daniel said thoughtfully tapping his chin and studying Johnny. "How long can you flex?"

"No clue, I guess we'll find out," Johnny said moving, adjusting and tensing his muscles, watching Daniel.

He looked so damn happy. Weirdo. Lovable weirdo. Daniel gently touched tense flexed muscle with the tip of his finger and went to work with chocolate and sprinkles, along the ridges. It was a lot of work. Johnny didn't know what for. But Daniel was having fun and it was such an easy thing to do.

"You know," Daniel said stepping back to enjoy his handwork. "You could probably get me to eat anything I didn't want to eat if it was served so nicely."

"Don't you like almost everything?" Johnny asked.

Daniel studied him closely and headed off to the couch to get one of the softer throw pillows and came back sticking it behind Johnny, under his head. "Get cozy."

"Get cozy, you say. Who gets cozy on the kitchen table?" Johnny said laying his head down, he saw spider webs.

How'd he miss those?

When had that happened?

Had they lived there long enough for spiderwebs to happen?

"Where are you?" Daniel asked with a soft laugh.

"Huh, oh, there's spider webs," Johnny said pointing at the lights.

"I lose your focus as soon as you have a chance to look at something else. A guy's feelings could get hurt from that you know."

Johnny pushed himself up looking at the teasing smile on Daniels face, licking away at Johnny's sweet decorated skin.

"Well I feel like we just cleaned and I'm trying to figure out how I hadn't noticed them before."

" Now? You're trying to figure that out now? You're 18, how on earth are you already an old man?" Daniel asked with a laugh. "If the guys call and ask what you're up to I'm going to tell them that you're contemplating spider webs we missed when cleaning, and that's you're excitement."

"Not going to tell them you decided to try and decorate me like a cake?"

"Bobby would be disappointed, you decorate a cake with icing not chocolate,"

"You could. I mean we have put chocolate and sprinkles on cakes. It goes on top of the icing, it drips down you know?"

"I stand corrected then, but you gotta show me next time."

"Are you sure you haven't been missing some chaos or something in your life?" Johnny asked looking at himself and the array of doodles and sprinkles melting on his skin.

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked.

"I'll get you some paper and finger paints next time I'm at the store, seems like you need to let off some creative steam."

"Can I just paint on your back?"

"Is it just an excuse to touch me? I didn't think you needed one."

"I don't but it seems like fun," Daniel said.

"You're not going to eat this all are you?" Johnny asked amused.

"It's not that much," Daniel said leaning down to lick up some chocolate.

Johnny felt the pinch of teeth and watched as Daniel worked on a spot

that would bruise. The point, after all. He was going to have to put off going to the beach for a while, it looked like he was going to be covered in love bites.

"Should I get you chewy candies?"

"Hmm?" Daniel asked moving to a different spot, clearing away sprinkles with his tongue.

"You like to bite."

"Just you," Daniel said, pausing and looking up at him with concern. "Am I hurting you?"

"No," Johnny said, "Though, could you give me a kiss before you go back to torturing me?"

"Torture? Me? How ever could that be possible?" Daniel asked leaning up to oblige with a warm kiss.

"You keep hovering right over it and then moving away," Johnny said pressing against Daniel, he'd gotten rid of the chocolate so he wrapped his arms around him, pulling him in close. "I know you said slow but this is too slow."

"Too slow? Is that even possible?"

"Well I'm about to start just taking care of myself or escaping to the shower early," Johnny said.

Daniel pouted. Then he sighed. "I suppose this is why they say you shouldn't play with your food."

"I'm not food."

"You're not but it seemed apt."

"Maybe don't tease your boyfriend."

"Feedback received," Daniel said kissing him again, warm and sweet and tasting like chocolate

Johnny ran his fingers across Daniel's skin, reaching for his waist, for the belt around his waist. A good challenge, could he remove it without looking? Answer seemed to be, a successful yes and he grinned, working on a button and zipper. Then Daniel pulled away and Johnny flopped back with a frustrated groan.

Daniel laughed.

"You would've liked that, I'm not going to do it now," Johnny said, arms crossed.

"I’m sorry I just feel like the tables have turned, pun not intended, but usually I'm the one dying to do it."

"Dying?" Johnny asked.

"Exaggeration, but," Daniel said pressing a warm kiss on Johnny's inner thigh, close enough to make his breath hitch with hope. "I'm sorry for teasing. I think this might help."

A warm mouth engulfed Johnny so suddenly that he almost jumped in shock. He pushed himself to look at Daniel who met his gaze with an amused and way too pleased look on his face. His hand was on Johnny's thigh to have something to steady himself but his thumb occasionally moved, pressing against him and Johnny tried to focus on his breathing, he wanted to watch but he couldn't handle it.

Daniel had gotten him too wound up. Teased him too much. He dug his heel into the table, into the cloth. He'd try, he'd try to pay attention to the obscene way Daniel was moving...he could sit up again... except Daniel was moving on. Adding to the sensation with his slicked fingers inside of Johnny and he gave up. He wasn't going to be able to handle looking. He wasn't going to move.

He'd focus on his breath. Maybe the damn spider webs. How many were there? In two sweeps of some duster he could get them.

Nope.

Not distracting enough now.

Daniel had found a good rhythm and Johnny moaned, trying to keep still. Incredibly still.

"Daniel?"

There was a sound of a curious hum that sent a shiver over his skin, goosebumps and he tried not to squirm. Tried to gather up what he was going to say. Tried to remember.

It'd been a request. It'd been something he wanted. What else could he have possibly wanted? Daniel was focused, between his legs, no longer

teasing him in the same ghost of a touch. The absence of himself. Johnny couldn't think of anything else. He could barely think.

That warm mouth, nice fingers the weight of Daniel left and Johnny pushed himself up when there was a change. When Daniel pulled away gaze, down, away from him. Enough. Enough teasing. Enough pulling away. Johnny was tired of being teased. There was a chair nearby. When Daniel stepped back, getting ready, Johnny pushed Daniel back and he fell onto the chair with a startled look of surprise.

Johnny didn't wait, slipping off the table and onto Daniel's lap. He wasn't sure when Daniel had gotten ready. Didn't care. He was tired of being teased and he was going for it, for what he wanted. He'd been ready and waiting for too long. He needed to move to take charge.

"Johnny-" Daniel said before whatever else he was going to say turned into a warm sound of pleasure. A deep sound that Johnny loved.

"You okay?" Johnny asked.

"Me?" Daniel asked. "What about you? That was a bit fast."

Johnny shifted thoughtfully, a roll of his hips. Daniel's hands went to his hips fast.

"I'm fine," Johnny said. "Better now."

Now he could actually see Daniel easier. He could touch him. He could get the show on the road. He started to move but Daniel's arms wrapped around his waist and held him close and tight.

Johnny gasped at the sensation, the friction, he wanted to squirm, to feel more.

"Sorry," Daniel said.

"Hmm?" Johnny asked.

"We just don't get...a lot of time to ourselves. Maybe we should've watched a movie or had our own date night. Gone out dancing or something. But I missed touching you, tasting you, and I couldn't pass it up. I owe you good dates."

"I owe you good dates," Johnny said, wrapping his arms around Daniel's shoulders, curling around him. The tile beneath his feet was cold the air was a little chilly but Daniel was warm. He

seemed...horny but bummed? Why? "You don't like me on your dick? Thought you wanted..."

Daniel laughed. "I do, this is great, hot, but I did want to fuck you on the table."

"Took too long."

"I see that now."

"Take responsibility," Johnny complained, shifting, trying to get some movement going.

"Good to know that you'll go for what you want," Daniel said, his breath warm on Johnny's skin. "That you'll still be fast and shocking when you want to be. Honored it's my dick you want."

Johnny laughed. "You promised going at it like rabbits. I want what I signed up for."

"Really?" Daniel asked pulling away a little.

Johnny looked at him, smiling softly.

"I'm down. I'll tell you if it's too much."

"I'm holding you too that."

Johnny nodded and gently squeezed Daniel's arm. "You mind letting me move?"

"What you don't like just sitting on it?"

"This is a different kind of torture, you can fuck me on the table after, just let me move. I've spent all day trying not to think about it, and now you're dragging it out."

Daniel grinned releasing his heavy grip and Johnny moved. Normally he'd pay attention to Daniel. Normally he'd try and be romantic and see how he was doing and what he liked but everything was fried from being teased. So he moved how he wanted. He went for what he wanted, hands holding steady on the back of the chair.

"Johnny," Daniel whispered reaching up and gently touching Johnny's face.

Johnny had an idea of where it felt best, of where that spot Daniel

went for was. A better understanding of his own body that he'd learned from the way Daniel touched him. From touching Daniel.

He'd done this before, a couple times, but usually the idea was to let Daniel relax. Now it was because he was impatient. Tired of being teased. He'd missed being with Daniel, feeling him inside, that odd full feeling. Daniel gaze made his chest tight, his skin tingly.

He was tired of trying to behave, tired of having a guest and not seeing Daniel, of only stolen moments. He was tired of not feeling him. Tired of not getting what he wanted. Constantly unsatisfied. He'd spent his whole life unsatisfied. Daniel's hand was on him, talking to him warmly, soothingly. He thought he had it, control, but Daniel made him stutter, the heat of his gaze, how it felt to be guided the rest of the way until he came, fingers digging into Daniel's shoulders a little harder than he normally would've.

"Fuck Johnny," Daniel whispered.

"All I'm asking for," Johnny murmured into his neck.

Daniel laughed softly, gently moving them.

"Been waiting all day...all week."

"Yeah?"

"You made a plan. If we were...more active. Then it probably wouldn't be so bad. But being teased, after barely getting to spend time with you, it's cruel."

Daniel wrapped his arms around Johnny, hugging him close and Johnny gasped softly at the sudden movement.

"Sorry about that, but you usually are a little harder to read on stuff like that. You..." Daniel chuckled softly. "Were prepared to be celibate because you thought I wasn't interested so I assumed, your drive wasn't quite as strong as mine so I wanted to to go slow today."

"I enjoy it. I never said I wasn't interested. I specifically said I was."

"I know, I know. My mistake. Sorry for teasing you. But that-"

Johnny could feel Daniel's warm breath on his neck, his hands slid down his back, grabbing his ass. Johnny squirmed.

"was very hot. You being enthusiastic-"

"I'm always enthusiastic."

"True. But...maybe that was different then enthusiastic...I don't know. You wanted it so badly. Needed it? Needed me that badly? Fuck I don't know how to handle that Johnny," Daniel's fingers were pressing gently into his skin. "Wanting me?"

"Of course I want you," Johnny said a little confused.

Daniel made a humming sound, fingers moving between to touch where they were still connected and Johnny jumped a little startled. "Can I play with you just a little bit? Now that you've satisfied yourself? Think you can move?"

"You want me back on the table?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah."

Johnny carefully put his hands on Daniel's shoulders, pulling away from the embrace and standing up, and carefully moved to sit on the table. He didn't really care, he was okay now. Sated for the moment. He could handle a little more teasing. He laid back down, head on the pillow, he could take a nap, but wouldn't. His muscles were burning in a nice way, like after a good work out and he shifted so his knees were bent but apart. Not quite sure what Daniel wanted.

Daniel didn't move so Johnny pushed himself up again looking at him. He was staring.

"Daniel? You know you can touch right? Or are you just mentally having sex with me right now?"

Daniel's eyes rose to meet his and he smiled. "My daydreams are not as good as reality. You know," he said standing up again and putting his hand on Johnny's thigh. "I had a lot of ideas for this evening. And you sent all of them flying off."

"Well honestly thought there'd be more touching then there was."

"I was working on it. Let's go back to where I left off okay? Let me see if I remember correctly what I was doing. I believe these were here," Daniel said thoughtfully sticking a couple fingers inside of him. "Was it two or three do you remember?"

"No."

"Let's go with three then just to be safe."

Johnny pressed down on them, trying to take in more, missing that full feeling. Daniel was teasing, again. But it wasn't as bad this time.

"Well you definitely weren't doing that last time," Daniel murmured, pressing his lips to Johnny's knee for a soft kiss. He glanced up at Johnny with a mischievous look on his face as he moved his fingers. "Which is better? My fingers or my dick?"

Johnny tried to meet his movement, tried to twist himself in a way that would get them to where he wanted them to be, but Daniel's hand was on his hip holding him still, not enough for Johnny to be completely unable to move, but enough to give him pause. He was maybe making more noise then he had been in a while, melting a bit, no longer biting his tongue because they had a guest. He was sensitive and Daniel smiled dipping his head down between Johnny's legs and while he tried to think of a response, tried to figure out what Daniel had asked and his response Daniel's mouth wrapped around him again and all that came out was a heady moan and a string of curses as he grabbed hold of the table cloth.

Maybe it was because he'd already orgasmed once, or maybe it was because they hadn't had time to themselves in a while and even though once had been good, maybe he was still pent up. But no matter what way it was, no matter the reason Johnny wasn't able to keep hold of a single thought. Just a buzz of pleasure that felt obscene. It probably was. He was trying not to think, trying not to care. Just to enjoy the ride, whatever Daniel wanted now, it'd be fine.

He'd be able to handle it.

It was just a beautiful warm pleasure building.

Oh.

"Daniel, I'm-" Johnny pushed himself up, ready to warn or push Daniel away but Daniel moved and gently pulled Johnny towards the edge of the table. He looked at Daniel stunned that he'd managed to move him so easily, shocked after being so far away he was suddenly there within reach and not hiding, not trying to escape his grasp. He wrapped his arms around Daniel. He wasn't going to let go. He was going to hold onto him this time.

"Hold on a second," Daniel murmured focused still with what he was doing.

"I am," Johnny said a little dazed. Close. It'd been close. "Not gonna last long," he murmured more of a thoughtful note.

Daniel looked at him and kissed one of the arms near him, moving, adjusting his position and Johnny felt him. He waited as the space between them disappeared. As Daniel's eyes held his steady. Once that stare had burned him up inside. Those brown eyes had pissed him off. But now they set everything in him on fire in a different way, a pleasurable fire that burned inside him. It was weird. He never spent so much time looking into someone's eyes before. But Daniel's, he knew those eyes well. Knew that what he'd once thought was fear or anger, when he'd been trying to figure Daniel out, now, when looking on him so warmly was different. Lust. Love. Eros.

He never was prepared for it. For the way Daniel looked at him. It was overwhelming and he wondered if some day he'd get use to it. To being in that spotlight after so long in the dark, unnoticed. It was easier to get lost in his eyes, studying the brown that studied him back, knowing that he didn't have to hold on anymore, because he wasn't alone. Because there were gentle hands held out to catch him. Whether it was in a closet at Jimmy's house or falling in to Kumiko's car in Okinawa.

He was so used to having to catch himself, of being pushed down, that he'd never noticed anything else, until those hands were on him, persistently supporting him. Not letting him fall. He was always at a loss for words, unable to put any of those feelings into words, kissing whatever piece of Daniel's skin was near him.

He loved so much that it was overwhelming. And to see it reflected back, something he'd been so sure wouldn't be the case, it tied his tongue up in knots. He didn't mind that he'd be covered in bruises tomorrow, covered in love bites, like a secret message between the two of them. While Johnny was busy through the day it'd be a reminder and Daniel would see it when he got home. When he came home to Johnny.

"Johnny?"

"Y-eah?"

"Having you is sweeter than any chocolate."

Johnny stared at him, the sincerity in his tone and felt his skin burn. Everything felt warm like honey, just as sweet. He grabbed Daniel, pulling him close, wrapping his legs around him, and kissing him until

he couldn't hold on any longer.

"Are you okay?" Daniel asked gently washing Johnny's back.

"Yeah, why?"

"You're standing weird."

Johnny felt his ears burn. Was he? Everything was kind of sensitive. He'd wanted to shower and go to bed and sleep it off.

"How much time do we have?" Johnny asked.

"You're ignoring the question. Maybe a half hour?" Daniel said, hands going lower.

"We gotta clean up."

"Isn't that what we're doing?" Daniel asked, giving Johnny's ass a squeeze.

Johnny's legs nearly went out from under him. He blinked looking back at Daniel.

"How are you still....okay? You're like somehow more energized."

"You're not?" Daniel asked pressing in close and Johnny felt a tired twitch of interest that didn't agree with their water pressure.

"I'm ready for a bed. You got your wish."

"What wish?" Daniel asked kissing his jaw.

"You wanted to go at it like rabbits. I don't think I've got another round in me."

"You sure?"

"Very. You can still? How? Nope. Don't want to know how. We've got a half hour. I want to finish this shower, clean up the kitchen table and go to bed."

"We should get one of those waterproof chairs, like they had in the bath houses in Okinawa. Maybe you could sit and I'd wash your hair."

"Hmm," Johnny said. "I don't think we've got the room."

Sitting did sound good though. And they'd cleaned recently. But would he be able to get back up?

Maybe.

"Hey where are you going?" Daniel asked.

"Got an idea. Might need help up later," Johnny said.

"You going to get stuck down there?" Daniel asked amused. "What's going to happen when we're old? If you're already thinking you might get stuck?"

"I'm just tired. It's not going to be the same thing at all."

"Uh huh sure, hey-"

"You can wash my hair if you want," Johnny said taking one of their soap containers and washing Daniel's legs and taking his time on Daniel's dick.

"I thought you were tired."

"Can't handle anything else down here," Johnny said motioning. "I lost track of how many times I came. But my arms aren't tired," Johnny said. "Plus it's about to be clean and my mouth isn't tired either."

He grinned looking up at Daniel

He leaned back a little so the water rinsed Daniel off, focused on the task at hand, then looked up at Daniel keeping eye contact as he gave it a long slow lick.

"You seem interested," Johnny said.

"Of course I'm interested," Daniel said. "You're sitting there all pretty and naked at dick level, and that wasn't washing, that was totally the start of a hand job, you can't even pretend it wasn't. You're teasing me on purpose."

Johnny laughed. "I've got to get revenge somehow. But I hope, sincerely, that bed time is after this."

"I don't even think it's ten pm Johnny," Daniel said. He was leaning forward palms flat on the tile looking down at him.

"You can stay up, I need sleep," Johnny said eyes going back to what he held in his hands, gently moving it so it wasn't facing away from him but instead towards his lips. "I can't believe you actually still have energy."

" Johnny !"

Johnny laughed, moving carefully so he had enough room and hopefully wouldn't slip and hit his head. It was one of the reasons he hoped Daniel would wash his hair, keep him from losing his balance and knocking himself out like an dumbass. Which was also why he was sitting and not kneeling, that and because his knees felt as weak as a regency era heroines. They'd be fine later he was sure, especially if he manged to talk Daniel into going to bed early.

He got past the tip on the first go, it was a skill he was still working on and bananas were not good practice partners. A good attempt, but he still had work to do. But a glance up at Daniel showed that Daniel didn't seem to care, that the act itself got him going. Hands were in his hair, soft and gently shampooing. He pressed forward, trying to figure out a decent bob that didn't get water in his face, that wouldn't eventually lead to soap in his eyes. He had time, time to figure it all out, to swallow Daniel down in a way that he wouldn't be able to stand it. To make his knees buckle in pleasure.

It was a secret goal.

One of them.

Oh. That was faster than he expected.

"Shit, sorry," Daniel said cupping Johnny's face and gently rinsing it off. "I didn't get any in your eye did I?"

"I'm fine," Johnny said. "How you can come and then panic so quickly is a feat."

"Well I didn't want you to lean forward to rub it off and get soap in your eye, so I panicked."

Johnny laughed softly turning his head to kiss Daniel's palm. "Maybe next time I'll try sitting in Seiza."

"Don't tease me about that," Daniel said.

"Interested?"

"Extremely."

"Okay, next time. Help me up will you?"

"You were serious?"

"Yeah, I was serious, it stings okay?"

"Johnny, why didn't you ask me to stop?"

"Because I was also enjoying it," Johnny said taking Daniel's hand and standing up carefully. "Which is why I'm looking forward to cuddling with you in bed soon."

"Let's maybe wash your face first."

"What? Didn't get it all off?" Johnny asked amused.

"Of course I did! But still, Just in case."

Johnny smiled kissing him quickly before turning to wash his face and run a hand through his hair to make sure there wasn't anything left in it.

"Are you satisfied with your White Day?"

"For now."

"For now? Louie did all the ground work for getting Chozen to take him to the movies. I lost track of how many times I came. You got your dining room table sex that you wanted."

"And a beautiful surprise lap dance sex."

"I didn't dance."

"No, but you moved beautifully to the point that I don't think a lap dance could ever compare."

"Uh huh, you got chocolates that I made,"

"And I ate chocolate off of you which was fun and you gave me a shower blow job."

"Yeah so how is it good for now, today was practically like your birthday."

"That's what I want for my next birthday."

"Huh?"

"I want to have so much sex that you forget how many times you came on my birthday."

"Daniel."

"I want you to get all weak in the knees and turn into an old man who wants to go to bed because he's tired of coming. I want your voice to be hoarse from moaning and crying out for more. I want to make you come with just my fingers."

"Daniel you're a horny monster, are you done bathing? I'm done. I'm leaving. You can stay here talking dirty to the walls but I'm going to curl up in our cozy bed," Johnny said kissing his shoulder and the stepping out of the shower, grabbing his towel and heading off to their room.

"Wait for me!" Daniel said and he listened to the water shut off and the sound of wet feet on the tile.

"Don't run and fall," Johnny said turning in the doorway and catching Daniel who hugged him tight around the waist.

"One, it's no fun if you're not there listening and blushing. Two. I bought popcicle molds and got bored and filled them with water. Want me to stick an popscicle in? Might help."

Johnny stared at him, speechless.

"No."

"You sure? If it's bothering you maybe I should take a closer look."

"Nu-uh you leave my ass alone. You've done enough investigative poking around. That's why it's the way it is in the first place."

"I didn't poke around. I made love. I was also trying to be very gentle but your the one who impaled himself on my dick first chance you got."

Johnny let go of Daniel, walking into their room and pushing back the covers.

"Wait you're not getting dressed."

"No."

"Shit," Daniel said looking around, wrapping his towel around his waist and hurrying back out.

Johnny curled up on his side of the bed and yawned. He could hear Daniel moving around the apartment and he sighed rolling over and hugging the whale shark.

"Did you fall asleep already?" Daniel asked crawling into bed next to him.

"No, you didn’t bring a popcicle did you?"

"No, but I cleaned up and I left a note for Louie telling him we've gone to bed and not to wake us up unless he wants to die."

"Don't murder your cousin,” Johnny said softly feeling Daniel’s warm skin on his, arms wrapping around him. He couldn’t even keep his eyes open long enough to see Daniel turn out the light, just feeling him close and the kiss pressed to his head before drifting off.

Chapter End Notes

Garlic grilled chicken with pesto Zucchini ribbons

ways to peel garlic

Bourbon Balls

Chicken Piccata

Herding

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daniel stood on the mansion doorsteps with the guys holding his bag. Really mansion didn't seem the right word.

Castle?

Dutch's home was intense. It was beautiful. And Johnny had promised they'd be spending the night. It seemed he was the only one who had. It was kind of shocking since the cobras seemed so glued at the hip that Bobby, Tommy and Jimmy hadn't slept over. And it was kind of sad that it was happening for the first time the night before Dutch left.

Daniel heard Johnny shut the Avanti door, getting the last of the stuff he wanted and they moved aside to let him pass, some unspoken word that Johnny should be the one to knock.

Johnny knocked but it was only met with quiet.

"Maybe no one's home," Daniel said softly.

"No, Dutch is home. It just takes him a while to get to the door," Johnny said.

"There's no staff?" Jimmy asked.

"Not usually. They don't get a lot of visitors," Johnny said. "The staff just clean and sometimes cook."

Daniel frowned. So an entire castle and more often then not the only one in it was Dutch? That didn't seem okay. Why hadn't Dutch had the guys over every second and minute he could? Or maybe that's why he was never home, why he could be found at their apartment eating the last of Daniel's ice cream.

"How do you know he's home?" Jimmy asked.

"His car is here."

"Which one?"

"All of them."

The door opened and Dutch stood there staring at them blearily from inside the dark home.

"What are you all doing here? I thought I was meeting you all for dinner..." he glanced at his watch with a frown, "In like five hours."

"You didn't miss anything," Johnny said stepping forward, pushing his way into the house.

"Wait, why do you have bags?" Dutch asked.

"We're spending the night," Johnny said.

"Listen the staff isn't here and my parents aren't here and-"

"I know ," Johnny said.

He stressed it, and the tension left Dutch's shoulders, they slumped and he sighed.

"If you'll give me a second you can stop panicking," Johnny said setting his bag down and patting his red jacket pocket for an envelope. "Trust me."

At that, the trust me, Dutch completely relaxed and shut the door behind them, waiting.

"Voilà," Johnny said pulling out a thick envelope Daniel remembered seeing come in the mail the week before.

He passed it over to Dutch.

Dutch opened the envelope, reading through it. His eyes shooting up to look at Johnny.

"You wrote to my parents?"

"Yup."

"You got permission to spend the night?"

"I did, but you should know this was going to happen one way or the other. There's no way you're spending your last night before your big trip alone. If I'd have failed I'd have sent Bobby or my mom after them," Johnny said, picking up his bag and resting it over his

shoulders. "You've helped all of us move, helped us adjust to new things, made sure Jessica and Kumiko got to the airport okay, multiple times on Jessica's part. Now it's your turn. We're not leaving your side."

Dutch's eyes looked glassy and Daniel decided fuck it.

He'd learned this group was the cuddliest group of friends he'd ever met and it was Dutch's turn.

He gave Dutch a hug prepared to hold on tight.

"Don't start," Dutch said with a huff, trying to pry Daniel off.

Daniel didn't budge.

"Hey don't look at me," Johnny said. "If Daniel wants to do something he goes for it and there's no stopping him. I've learned to accept this. I also know that his grip is strong and there's no escaping that either."

Daniel laughed and Dutch sighed hugging Daniel back. "You're a stubborn terror and I'm going to miss you."

"Me? A terror? What about you!" Daniel asked with a laugh.

"Hey I never pretended to be anything but what I am. You're the one whose all peaceful meditation Mr. Miyagi style on the outside and little scheming demon on the inside."

"I blame you."

"Don't blame me! I can't be the one who corrupted you. You were already full of mischief. I refuse responsibility. Absolutely refuse. Ah man, seriously, all of you lemme go, you get to spend the night here for the first time ever, except you Johnny, and we don't even get past the damn foyer? Johnny, get 'em off me."

Daniel listened to the guys laughing hugging Dutch.

"Nah man, enjoy your cuddles, get used to it. You're doomed. 'sides you should hear Daniel sometimes. He's like itching for revenge."

"Revenge? What revenge?" Dutch asked.

"Ah, I didn't mention? We're sharing your bed tonight," Johnny said.

"What?"

"I'll go hide your porn magazines," Johnny said with a laugh footsteps retreating into the house.

"You seriously live alone and just leave skin mags around?" Bobby asked.

"Shut up, there's no wining this conversation," Dutch said sourly. "Why do you all have to stay with me? Why my bed? You do know there are perfectly good beds elsewhere in this house. There's a ton of guest bedrooms. You could be so spread out in the house you wouldn't even know the rest of us were here."

"That's the opposite of what we want," Tommy said.

"Yeah why would we want to be on the whole other end of this gigantic fortress when our plan is to spend time with you?" Jimmy asked.

"You know we always stay with each other. Hell nine times out of ten we share Jimmy's bedroom. We created that habit because of Johnny and now I refuse to break it," Bobby said.

"But Johnny needed it," Dutch said winding up for a protest. "I don't-"

"You do too," Daniel said. "This big place by yourself. That sucks."

"I spend plenty of time not here, with you guys."

"True," Bobby said. "and you're always welcome. But I'm glad we're here to be with you tonight."

"This is so sappy!" Dutch complained, squirming but failing to dislodge any of them. "Johnny! Johnny come take them away!"

"No!" echoed back down the hallway.

"Take your boyfriend back at least or else… I'm going to kiss him!"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"You don't know that! Maybe that's the best way to get them all off of me!"

There was silence, all of Dutch's muscles were tense.

A voice floated down from somewhere above, Johnny had moved from wherever he had been.

"1. I trust Daniel. 2. Daniel will kick your ass if he wants to and you know it. 3. I don't think you could handle kissing him. As for the rest of the guys, go for it. I don't doubt it hasn't happened, like do you remember how drunk we all got after you got out of juvie for breaking that dart board?"

"You went to juvie?"

"Like once...or twice," Dutch said sourly.

"We celebrated his release by going to Jimmy's cousins bar because a couple of times before, our first time out, a bartender served us dish water. Like actual dish water," Tommy said. "I still drank it."

"No one believed we were the right age to be drinking and I guess the bartender wanted to teach us a lesson so we wouldn't try it again, but it failed," Bobby said with a laugh.

"Not our fault the only one who knew what beer actually tasted with was Jimmy," Dutch said sourly. "But anyway someone was being a dick."

"And Dutch broke the dart board and the bartender picked the other guys side."

"So I went to juvie."

"And when he got out we went to Jimmy's."

"Johnny picked me up from juvie on a bike," Dutch said softly.

"And we got plastered. My cousin didn't mind us celebrating, just made sure we didn't drive our bikes home. I think when he closed up for the night he drove us to my house and we sort of stumbled out and spent the night at mine?"

"I don't remember that," Tommy said.

"That's because we had to like carry your ass. You were such a light weight," Dutch said with a fond laugh.

Daniel felt someone ruffle his hair. "You're lucky, we were such a bad influence. But I'd say we got better."

"We weren't always drunk or high," Bobby said. "And it's not like we've given it all up."

"Yeah you gotta enjoy everything while you still can Father , " Dutch said.

"Don't call me that."

"Okay Pops ."

"Wait so why did Johnny make it sound like you guys kissed?" Daniel asked.

"We didn't, not really. Johnny fell asleep early and we had a really really dumb idea for a joke," Jimmy said.

"It was really bad," Bobby agreed. "We borrowed his mom's lipsticks, tried it on and then like left marks on each other so it'd seem like Johnny and Tommy slept through and missed a bunch of babes."

"Jokes was on them though," Johnny said with a laugh. "They were so drunk they forgot to wipe the lipstick off their own mouths."

"How old were you?"

"I think it was our first year of karate," Bobby said thoughtfully.

"No wonder the bartender knew we weren't old enough," Tommy said with a laugh. "Have you looked back at pictures from our first year? We were so small."

"No way anyone got babes back then."

"Not the kind that wore lipstick anyway," Johnny said with a laugh. "Now, Dutch, traditionally for our sleepovers we hang out in a room for a bit. Have snacks, eventually have dinner."

"I know that," Dutch said. "How many sleepovers have I had with you?"

"More than I can count."

"Exactly."

Johnny was smiling. "We've brought snacks, drinks, board games, and our pretty faces."

"Pretty faces," Dutch repeated with a laugh. "Daniel's the only one with a pretty face."

"Thank you."

"Hey!"

"But first, un-fun stuff," Johnny said. "Are you packed?"

"Partially," Dutch said.

"Then let's help you finish packing first."

"What?"

"Follow me," Johnny said walking off down the hall again.

"Wait a second," Dutch said.

Daniel let go following Johnny, looking at the parts of the house he'd never seen.

House seemed too common for the shiny marble and the statues.

He reached out and took Johnny's hand. Johnny laced their fingers, leading Daniel up a spiral staircase.

"What's going to happen while you're gone?" Bobby asked. "Aren't you the only one who really lives here?"

"Half the wings are already closed off," Dutch said. "They'll just also close off my wing."

"What about your peacocks?" Daniel asked.

"Staff will feed them when they come to do basic stuff. Though really the greenhouse is a self contained ecosystem."

They entered a long hallway with massive paintings on the walls. Not portraits, like last time but impressionist paintings and still lifes. They passed a couple doors and then Johnny pushed open the door on the end.

Daniel wasn't sure what he expected.

No.

He knew what he'd expected.

He'd expected one of those fancy replica rooms that museums had or

something out of a fancy period drama. He expected it to match the rest of the house.

But it was a cozy room. There was a fireplace which Daniel wondered if it ever got used since it was almost never cold in LA. There was a comfortable looking couch, posters for bands on the walls, every single one of them signed, signed guitars next to them. There were a few signed movie posters too. Dutch had his own TV, VHS player, stereo, and Daniel spotted a computer on Dutch's desk. But as his eyes passed all the tech they fell on the bed. It was massive.

"That's your bed?!" Daniel gasped.

Johnny grinned watching him and the guys take in the room.

"Uh, yeah," Dutch said.

"You mean to say you crowded into my bed countless times, and Johnny's bed, when we all could've been here in that?!"

"Shit Dutch, you seriously sleep by yourself in a California King size bed?"

"Yeah, what's wrong with that?"

"You ever get lost in that thing?"

"I like not touching the edges at all."

"How long does it take you to get out of it?"

"It takes a while, especially if you're in the middle. A lot of scooting," Johnny said with a laugh.

"You wanted to put us in other rooms when we could share that thing with you? Seriously? What you got creepy stuff or something in here?" Jimmy asked.

"What? No!" Dutch said.

"He's just not used to having guests," Johnny said.

"Rooms can tell you a lot about a person," Daniel said looking at the wooden carved animals on the mantel. "When did you get such a big bed?"

"Third grade."

"What? Seriously?"

"Parents thought I was old enough."

"Is it comfortable?"

"You're going to find out tonight aren't you?" Dutch asked.

Daniel blinked and grinned. "Hell yeah I am. And you won't have to shove me on top of Johnny for there to be enough space."

"How will you survive?"

"He'll probably still latch onto Johnny," Tommy said looking at the stained glass over the windows, with their window seats and view of the gardens and long dramatic curtains.

"So what are these?" Bobby asked picking up a soft octopus sitting on Dutch's desk. "You packing this?"

"He better," Johnny said as Dutch scooped it up.

"It's nothing, Just an octopus."

"That octopus looks familiar," Daniel said turning and walking over. "Oh! Is that the one from in the paintings?"

Dutch stared at Daniel. "You're too observant for you own good."

Daniel grinned. "I knew it! You gotta take it."

"So your childhood toy is an octopus?" Jimmy asked.

"My parents liked naval stuff," Dutch said with a frown. "I dressed in a little sailor suit a lot as a kid. It was their favorite outfit of mine."

"Did you have a ship?"

"I have three."

"You have three ships?"

"I have a yacht and actual ships I can go out on."

"You also have a canoe and a sail boat," Johnny said.

"What? Why didn't we go out on any of those?" Bobby asked.

"Dude we could've spent our senior year on a yacht. Seriously?"

"It's a pain," Dutch said. "I have to call my parents and get permission and they have to contact the captain and they have to get the food and the drink and besides we spent the rest of our senior year trying to get these two bozos together. A yacht party just didn't seem...worth it?"

"Maybe we would've gotten together faster if you'd put us on a boat together," Daniel said with a teasing grin turning to look for Johnny who had zero'd in on Dutch's suitcase and was digging around.

"Dutch, why's your suitcase like eighty percent deodorant?" Johnny asked.

"My packing list I was given said that they don't really sell deodorant there."

"Seriously?"

"I mean it might be available on one of the US army bases, but I've kind of had my fill of that. I don't want to meet any more Kreese or Silvers."

"Can I see that list?"

"Yeah let me find it."

Dutch searched through some papers on his desk, past his passport and grabbed a piece of paper handing it to Johnny.

"How long are you planning to be gone?"

"What why?"

"I mean, this is enough deodorant for like five years."

Daniel walked over looking at Dutch's suitcase and leaning down to rest his head on top of Johnny's.

"Too many?" Dutch asked with a frown.

"I mean are you going to college there or something? Are you planning to become a master? Aren't you going to come back, visit, and restock?"

"How much should I take? I mean I'm going to be working out," Dutch

asked with a frown.

"I don't know somewhere between like four and six probably," Johnny said. "Not, what is this, thirty? What'd you do buy out all the deodorant in the Valley?"

"I didn't know," Dutch said. "I panicked okay? I've never left the Valley for this long. And they don't sell it."

"Just like take out half. What else did you pack?" Johnny asked taking out a couple sticks of deodorant.

"Is that a towel?" Daniel asked, leaning over Johnny and reaching for the towel.

"Yeah. I've packed two."

"Like Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy or something?" Jimmy asked.

"Apparently the towels are small."

" Prince and the Pea much?" Tommy asked.

"I'm sorry did I judge all of you and your packing choices?" Dutch asked whirling on them.

Bobby held up his hands. "This is new territory for all of us."

"If you don't take 30 deodorants you can fit other stuff. Like spice packets," Johnny said holding up the packing list. "Or jello."

Dutch frowned studying his suitcase and sighed. "If I run out or wish I had these I'm going to complain to you and make you come here and ship them to me."

"Spices won't weigh as much either," Jimmy said. "Though really if you miss anything let met know and I'll ship it to you."

"Thanks," Dutch said.

"Did you pack any clothes?" Daniel asked.

"Not you too," Dutch complained turning towards him.

"Sorry, you've done a fine job packing. But you should take some clothes."

"I said I wasn't done," Dutch said, then sighed. "It gets cold there okay? So like yeah I'm going in March but should I take winter clothes? Like what I wear to the lodge?

"Probably for the best," Bobby said.

"Okay, Johnny you can take out some of the deodorant, but leave me with six," Dutch said turning and opening a door. "What games did you bring?" he called.

Daniel got up and walked towards the door, curious about the echo.

Dutch's closet was another room.

He stood in the center of the room with the light on looking at his clothes with a frown.

"I don't think I've ever seen a guy with so much clothes," Daniel said.

"This isn't a lot. My dad has one of these that's just suits. Let's see where'd I put my winter jacket."

"We brought Conspiracy," Jimmy said. "Woah."

"That's four players max though."

"Yeah, thought Daniel and Johnny could play as one person."

"Hey we like competing against one another."

"That still is 5," Dutch said opening up some doors and looking with a frown at the clothes. "We're six."

"I brought Trivial Pursuit," Tommy said.

"See, Tommy at least knows you need a game for enough people."

"I also brought Aggravation," Jimmy said.

"At least you admit it."

"The board game," Jimmy said.

Dutch leaned back grinning at Jimmy. "I know."

"Do you need some help? Did you get lost?" Bobby asked.

"No. Of course I didn't get lost in my own closet."

"Just checking."

"What should our prize be?"

"Huh?" Dutch asked arms full of clothes walking past them and back out into his room.

"For the winner of the board games?" Bobby asked.

"It can't be booze," Tommy said.

"Yeah not with you having a flight in the morning. Flying dehydrates you enough, especially flying overseas. You don't need that on top of it," Jimmy said.

"Man, who are all of you, my parents?" Dutch asked dumping his clothes on top of Johnny and his suitcase.

"Hey."

"You brought them here," Dutch said shaking his head. "I blame you."

"It's love man, accepted it."

"I do, that's the messed up bit."

"Then hang in there a little longer."

"Shut up," Dutch said spinning and walking back to the closet. "Truth or Dare," he told Bobby as he passed.

"With a veto option," Bobby agreed.

Daniel watched Johnny carefully folding Dutch's clothes and putting it away. He walked over sitting next to him. "You okay?"

"Yeah, we're all just kind of, sad," Johnny said softly. "It's going to be a rough night."

"You think so?" Daniel asked, helping Johnny fold the clothes and pack them.

"He's trying not to cry and we're trying not to cry," Johnny said. "We want him to have a fun adventure but we're sad to see him go, and he's excited but he's sad to leave. I mean this happens every time someone leaves. You'd think we'd be used to it by now. But Dutch is..."

Johnny frowned looking at one of the shirts Dutch had dumped on him and sighed. He looked incredibly sad. Daniel got it, or at least he thought he got it and he pushed clothes aside hugging Johnny tightly.

"I know," Daniel said.

"They're all important to me and it was hard to say goodbye even just that half hour distance," Johnny said softly. "But this is way further. He's going to another country, not for a couple of weeks, not for a summer vacation or a month like they've done in the past. He's going to be gone for an open ended amount of time."

Daniel could feel him holding on, hugging back tightly, like he needed to feel how solid Daniel was next to him, anchoring him.

"We'll visit him," Daniel said rubbing Johnny's back.

"Yeah, I know but...he's the one who comes to the shop. He visits you on campus right? He's at our place more often then anyone else. Well...other than Louie."

"It means no one's going to scare me half to death at six in the morning sitting in the dark eating my ice cream," Daniel said.

"That was once right?"

"Three times," Daniel said.

Johnny laughed softly and the worry Daniel felt lessened.

It felt surreal, to be sitting on the floor of Dutch's fancy room with Johnny making sure he was packed.

Dutch.

The guy who delighted in making his life hell, who Daniel never expected to apologize to him. The guy who got in trouble in gym class on purpose to sit down next to him and say I suppose I should start with sorry for being a shit. His first attempt to talk up Johnny. Something about how Johnny not being as bad as Daniel thought and inviting him to Jimmy's senior year party. Pushing them into a closet together where Daniel got to catch Johnny, being sneaky all the time trying to not just make sure Daniel was having a good senior year but also that he and Johnny were together as much as possible. From giving him pieces of gum on the way to class, to hanging around his locker. All the guys had taken Daniel in, but Dutch always turned

around and made sure Daniel didn't lag behind. Like one of those dogs that herds.

Daniel hadn't realized it at first. Not while they were in school. But when they got back from Okinawa, when Daniel was training Dutch was keeping him moving. Kept pushing him forward. Every time Daniel didn't want to get out of bed, enjoying sleeping with his hand on Johnny's pec and not wanting to leave the warmth of their embrace Dutch was there dragging his ass out of bed and making him move. Even after Jessica left. He'd been there, a pain in his ass for so long.

Dutch and his dumb van that hadn't prepared Daniel for his house. A van that smelled of stale weed and played ABBA and opera but fit all their friends. Dutch and his regal pecking peacocks and honey bees. Dutch and pushing Daniel over onto Johnny so he could sleep next to them.

Daniel was sure if he asked Dutch would say he couldn't sleep comfortably on the floor, but Daniel was pretty sure he knew, that when things were bad it felt safer surrounded.

What was it called? Brumation that cobras did? How snakes all slept together so they stayed warm.

Dutch who came to campus and waited for him outside his classes like he didn't have anything else to do or anywhere else to be except to hang out with Daniel. It'd been such a relief to see him the first several times. It was unspoken. They'd never say it. But Dutch was there to make sure Daniel was safe. That no one was bothering him. That if he didn't feel okay that Dutch was there, waiting outside his class.

He knew if he'd told Johnny Johnny would've skipped working in the shop to be there. But he wanted to try and do it on his own.

And Dutch was there because he heard they had good coffee on campus.

Because he was curious what campus life was like.

Because he was bored.

They were all excuses.

It was because the guys didn't get into that much trouble and were together at UCLA, it was because Johnny was safe with Mr. Miyagi. It was because Daniel was alone at school, alone at sea and Dutch was

there as a life guard keeping an eye from the shore so that he could swim safely amongst the waves.

There was so much. So much to say to Dutch, so much that Daniel felt overwhelmed.

Daniel felt a warm hand on his back and sniffed.

"Stop it you two," Bobby said with a whisper. "This isn't allowed. Johnny don't give me that look. If one of you starts crying the other will start crying and then I'll start and then we'll all be up all night sobbing. We agreed to try and stave off tears until the flight at least. Until he was gone."

"I'm trying," Johnny whispered, not pulling away from Daniel or loosening his grip, his voice sounded tight.

"Are you two literally holding each other together? Like if I pulled you apart right now would you both just start crying? Seriously?" Bobby asked and Daniel felt a tug on his shoulder, not strong enough to actually pull them apart. Then a sigh. "We'll finish packing quick and then move on to a game. So just this one time, pull yourselves together huh? You guys brought snacks, go do snacks and come back when you've pulled yourselves together."

"Yeah," Johnny said and Daniel felt him move, felt the arms around him shift and then the ground went out from underneath him as Johnny lifted him up.

"Hey," Daniel said.

"Sorry," Johnny whispered, he was walking fast from the room, still holding Daniel tight.

"Is it really that bad?" Daniel whispered.

"We all made a deal," Johnny said.

"To not cry?"

"Yeah."

Daniel sighed pressing his face into Johnny's shoulder. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought you'd be fine, but I wasn't expecting to be the first to cave."

"Wait you're crying?" Daniel asked pulling back and twisting to look at Johnny, tears were running down his cheeks and his brow was furrowed like he was mad that he was crying.

"Johnny," Daniel said wiping them away with his thumbs and kissing his cheek. "He's your friend, it's normal."

Johnny set Daniel down.

Daniel cupped his face. "Maybe it'd be better to let it out now huh? While it's just us?"

There was a twitch in Johnny's jaw, the glassiness of his eyes was there again.

"We can talk about it," Daniel said. "I mean I'm going to miss him too, you know?"

Johnny nodded rubbing at his eyes.

"He's been a much better friend then I ever expected. I mean if you went back and told me hey you and Dutch are going to be great friends I would've thought you'd lost it."

Johnny laughed softly.

"Now tell me I would've fallen in love with you I would've denied it, but then I'd have taken a second look at you, and been like yeah no I can see that," Daniel said. "But Dutch...out of all your cobras, I don't know, I didn't trust them as much. Together you all were a nightmare, but on your own you were less bitey. Dutch terrified me you know? And I know you two are close. I know all of you are close. I mean you all share a damn bed. Do you know what a pain in the ass it was to wake up having gone to bed with just you and waking up to find one of the guys, usually Dutch, also in our bed? I've never woken up so much with a strong desire of just murdering someone I care about. But at the same time-"

Johnny held him tight again. Daniel slid his hand into Johnny's hair, playing with it carefully.

"I'm going to miss it," Daniel finished softly. "I'm going to miss him too. And I'm kind of looking forward to that giant bed of his and I'm also kind of pissed that we've all been crammed in like sardines when we could've been here sleeping in that thing. And you! You've slept in it before haven't you?"

He felt Johnny nod. "Yeah."

"Why'd you never say anything? Why'd you never push us to come here?"

"With his parents...it's not easy," Johnny said softly. "They don't trust anyone. They trust the guys now because they saw us cheer him on at the tournament and saw all of you show up at the trial. But before that...a lot of people didn't want to be Dutch's friend to be his friend. They wanted to be a friend of his money and his things. You thought I was a spoiled rich kid right? That's what people think Dutch is too and they assume if they're nice to him they deserve to be given power and money. But they also always look out for ways to force him to do that stuff, you know?"

"Not really," Daniel said with a frown.

Daniel felt Johnny move, pressing his face against Daniel's shoulder and he sighed. "People who said they were his friends, who said they wanted to be his friends were always looking for him to trip up so they could blackmail him. Can you imagine not even being ten and your classmates trying to blackmail you? He got really awful food poisoning shortly after we met and I made sure he got home and I stuck with him because I was worried and he told me My parents won't give you anything, no matter what. Like he expected me to tell his parents he'd eaten something awful and use it to blackmail them into giving me money or to try and win over money.

“I didn't understand a word he was saying. I thought he was delusional because he was sick or something. It didn't click until like a year later when we ran into some other kids who used to go to his old school and tried to blackmail him because they caught us smoking and tried to get him in trouble. He ended up in juvie that time," Johnny sighed.

"What if he gets into fights overseas? He's over 18 he won't go to juvie he'll get deported or thrown in jail. What if he gets hurt? I won't be there to back him up. Will there be people to check in on him? I mean the guy tried to pack 30 deodorants, will he be okay on his own?"

"Says you who threw yourself onto a flight to Okinawa without any money."

Johnny pushed back, looking at Daniel, startled from his tears.

"What I mean is, we all make dumb choices. He's probably

overwhelmed, just like you are, just like I get."

It wasn't good. Daniel wanted to kiss him. But was it a bad idea when his heart was breaking?

Daniel licked his cheek. Johnny turned bright red and Daniel stiffened. He'd tried to avoid kissing Johnny and instead had just automatically licked up tears.

Why?

Why had that been the alternative?

Also was there a room where he could drag Johnny off into and maybe release some of that stress?

Oh god, why was that his answer? Johnny was sad about his friend and his automatic answer to that was he'll feel better if I fuck him ?

"Can I kiss you right now?" Daniel asked gently, trying to push down his desire to pepper Johnny in kisses, to grab his ass and turn those tears into tearful moans.

Was this avoidance?

Was he avoiding how he was feeling about Dutch leaving?

Probably.

Was this a good distraction technique?

Maybe.

Maybe it was a perfect one actually. Distract both of them with a bit of sex.

Johnny seemed to be absolutely speechless and Daniel smiled softly. "Cat got your tongue? Mind if I check?"

Daniel kissed him, a warm press of lips and waited to see if Johnny would kiss him back, if he didn't he'd pull away. But Johnny shut his eyes and kissed him back, fingers gripping his shirt tightly and kissing him in a needy desperate way that made Daniel's heart pound.

Maybe they could?

No, that'd be bad right?

But it wasn't like anyone would come looking for them. Bobby would make them all avoid them, because if they saw Johnny cry they'd cry too. So no one would leave that room until they came back which meant he could try something.

Maybe, just touch? He'd test it out.

He slid one hand into Johnny's back pocket and gave a squeeze.

"Should we...distract each other? Get rid of some pent up feelings?" Daniel asked trying to sound as casual about it as possible even though he knew Johnny could tell, could feel how badly he wanted to do something.

Johnny looked thoughtful lowering his head to Daniel's chest, breathing carefully.

"Okay."

"Okay?" Daniel asked, trying to sound like he was confirming and not excited.

He was too excited.

Maybe it was bad, was there something wrong with him?

Johnny was sad.

Hell, he was sad.

But he could push past it if he could make Johnny moan in his ear. He ran a hand down Johnny's chest, squeezing and rubbing at Johnny's nipples.

It helped.

Or at least it helped him . He studied Johnny's face, kissing him softly.

Why was it suddenly so easy to put aside his own concern because Johnny was letting him touch him?

Was he that easily distracted?

Who was he kidding, of course he was.

Johnny sometimes just had to walk past and he'd forget what he was doing.

It was driving Louie nuts. Hey cuz, earth to Daniel. Seriously?

Johnny was just going about his business, his life and Daniel was like one of those old school cartoons wolves that couldn't control themselves.

"Daniel?" Johnny whispered, voice already raw sounding from trying to stifle tears. "What do you want to do?"

Great question.

Wonderful question.

What wasn't going to be chilly?

Johnny hadn't liked that last time.

Also, he hadn't brought anything because Johnny said they were all sleeping together.

Daniel looked around the kitchen.

It was massive.

Like the kind he'd seen in the back of the country club but not nearly as busy or chaotic.

Empty, shiny and clean.

Probably rarely used.

He spotted some olive oil and grabbed it before returning to Johnny.

"I always want to do a lot. But how about, you hop up here," Daniel said patting the countertop.

He bet it was marble. He thought maybe bending Johnny over that would be beautiful but, he needed coziness and he hadn't moved far away from Daniel yet. Turning his back to Daniel was probably going to be too much right now. He'd add it to the list though.

Maybe at home.

If Louie ever left their apartment.

He'd been asking about the dojo a lot.

Maybe he could figure out how much it'd cost to send Louie to study under Chozen.

It sounded awful. A terrible decision, but if he could get Louie out of the house more?

If it meant more time to spend alone with Johnny then it'd be worth it.

Maybe.

Plus Louie could annoy Chozen a little.

Johnny lifted himself up onto the countertop with ease, a fluid movement. He'd picked the shorter of the counter tops. Waist height, perfect height to hook his hands behind Johnny's knees and make room for himself between them.

One day, if he owned a home, no, when he owned a home his goal would be that everything would be this height, the right height to lay Johnny out on or bend him over. But comfortably.

Maybe not ideal for cooking.

He'd have to rethink it.

Could he have both?

"You know what?" Daniel whispered into Johnny's neck giving him a kiss under his jaw.

"Hmm?"

"I'm not going anywhere. You need me just look over and I'm there okay?" Daniel said.

"I know," Johnny said softly. "Why do you think I grabbed you and ran?"

Daniel grinned.

Johnny had done that hadn't he?

He couldn't handle it and just picked Daniel up and left.

"Well," Daniel said carefully unbuttoning and unzipping Johnny's jeans. "I didn't bring condoms, I mean I have some but they're in the

car and I don't particularly want to get caught or seen from a window going to the car to get condoms, so hopefully this will be okay for now. I know you probably also don't want to take too long hmm?" Daniel asked taking Johnny in his hand.

It'd been a while since White Day, since they'd gotten to make love. And Louie had come back and been even more of a pain then before.

He'd literally sat between them on the couch during their movie night the day before.

Again.

Daniel tugged Johnny by the hips a little closer, poured a little oil into his hand and pressed against him, rubbing together.

He wanted to do more. So much more. But this was better and Johnny was thrusting his hips up to meet him, panting and not crying any more. Though his eyes were still wet looking. He looked a little desperate still, for whatever Daniel could give him and damn did Daniel wish they were home, that Louie was elsewhere, that he'd stuck the condom in his pocket like he'd planned to before they got out of the car. But Johnny was already trying to carry everything on his own and Daniel had to rush if he'd help.

But of course there'd been more. There was always more somewhere in the car.

Johnny grabbed the sides of his face and pulled him into a hungry kiss. One of his long legs was wrapped around Daniel's waist like he was using it for purchase when he moved against him.

Daniel leaned down, pushing Johnny down on the counter top and pushing his shirt up. Johnny's hands were in his hair, moaning into the kiss, nipping at Daniel's lips.

He wanted a vacation, just the two of them so badly.

Clothing optional.

But he wanted it at their own apartment where he knew where everything was. Where all the lube was, all the condoms, all the soft blankets and pillows. Or heck, in the Avanti would be nice. That one went straight to his dick. Hmmm he'd put that one in the jar. Johnny in the backseat of his car like this but wanting more. Yeah that was dangerous, a dangerous thought if he wanted it to last a little longer.

He hoped it helped. That this made it better not worse. He knew that sometimes it became overwhelming, Johnny had cried afterwards. At least once. But he was hoping that this popped whatever emotional bubble was bother him, popped it and settled it so he could enjoy the time with the cobras, and that Daniel could focus. Focus on saying goodbye...or goodbye for now and thank you. Because while all that hard work the cobras did didn't get them together, a storm in Okinawa and Mr. Miyagi's final wish got Johnny moving.

All those dates with the cobras got the ball rolling, got them closer, and Daniel was forever grateful to them. For Johnny.

He also needed it. Needed to be close to Johnny, a moment to themselves to restart. To shed some stress and what better way then working their way to an orgasm? Johnny's hand with his, adding pressure right where Daniel needed it, moaning Daniel's name. It sent him over the edge, such an easy addition that made him wonder if Johnny secretly knew all the right buttons to push like a cheat code on an arcade game. But Johnny was there with him, holding him close, lips on his neck, on whatever skin was near him.

It was soothing, loving, the way he ran his fingers along Daniel's skin, along his back until Daniel pulled back to get stuff to help clean up. Johnny sat up on the counter taking what Daniel handed him.

"Any better?" Daniel asked softly.

"Yeah," Johnny said sliding off the counter looking remarkably put together for someone who'd been crying out Daniel's name only moments ago.

He didn't like how untouched he looked all of a sudden, he liked basking in the messy afterglow but there wasn't much. Instead Johnny was smoothing down Daniel's hair.

"Sorry messed it up a bit. What kind of snacks should we take up?"

"What does Dutch usually have?"

"It fluctuates, sometimes a little bit of everything, sometimes stuff from other countries, sometimes nothing," Johnny said opening one of the fridges. "Looks like we're leaning towards nothing."

"That makes sense."

"Yeah we've got string cheese and pudding," Johnny said with a

frown.

"Grab both?"

"Aha, Jello."

"What's with the Jello?"

"Dutch likes Jello," Johnny said with a shrug filling his hands with cups of snacks and filling a pocket of his jacket with spoons. "Want to grab some sodas?"

Daniel nodded, filling his arms then following Johnny back through the halls up to Dutch's room.

They were sitting around a board game, the bag was fully packed and zipped and sitting by the door, a stack of deodorant sat on Dutch's desk.

"Welcome back, I'd have worried you'd got lost if Johnny hadn't been with you," Dutch said glancing up from the board. "We'll play something we can all play next."

"Anyone win yet?" Johnny asked holding out snacks that the cups took and passing out spoons.

"Not yet, but soon," Tommy said.

Daniel set the drinks down on the edge of the table and sat down watching the game, listening to the guys talk. Bad jokes and intensity fighting off the impending gloom and melancholy.

He watched them, he could see the brave faces they were putting on.

He wouldn't have been able to tell a year ago, but the signs were there, the way they talked, the way they laughed, it was hidden in their eyes, the sadness there, waiting for a moment of quiet.

He'd seen it when they'd said goodbye to Jessica the first time, when they'd said goodbye to Kumiko.

Johnny was the easiest to read but that was because Daniel knew him too well.

He was steadier than he had been, laughing and teasing Tommy who was losing, in a playful manner, leaning against Jimmy.

They hadn't gone to the ski lodge that year. From what Daniel had learned, accidentally while visiting the guys on campus it was the first year those five hadn't gone to the lodge since they'd met.

They'd joked saying it was because of finals and their first year at college. But Daniel knew it wasn't because of that.

It was because of him.

Because Daniel was training to compete.

Because of Silver and Kreese and Barnes.

Because Johnny didn't feel safe leaving Mr. Miyagi alone for long.

Even if the man could kick all their asses with his eyes shut. Johnny didn't want to leave anyone alone. And the guys didn't want to be out of reach, they wanted to be near the phone.

Jenny had mentioned it once, on accident, not realizing while she'd been walking between Johnny and Daniel, arms hooked through theirs on the way to a UCLA game while the guys had run to go grab seats and she'd complained quietly to them about the shoes she was wearing being new.

"Jimmy was a wreck last winter you know? We weren't dating yet but I kept inviting him out of the firm or out from class to go do stuff and he just didn't want to be far away from his phone. I got him to go out to this all night show once, the last time I wore a new pair of shoes. Should've learned my lesson then. It was fascinating though. He gathered all of them up and made sure they knew where he was and how to get a hold of him. I wanted to hurry because I'd started to feel my shoes pinch and realized that I needed to trade them out but it was kind of too late. I ended up going barefoot. Dancing barefoot to the music once we got there.

"I'd asked him about it while we were there because I'd never seen so many checks and balances in a friendship. Like my friends and I ask each other to let us know when the other gets home right? Like I wait till they go inside before I drive off and what not, but this is a whole other level. But then you know he talked about it, the actual trial with this creep and I got it. Like all the evidence we were collecting and everything, I mean I'd be worried sick about my friends too. And myself. Like what if that guy's focus left the target right? What if it spilled out onto someone else? I'd be terrified if that guy turned and I was in his sights. I don't know how they all managed. But they did.

Oh, oh , I forgot, Daniel I forgot, I'm sorry, you two had the worst of it. I can't believe-"

"It's okay," Johnny had said. "We know it was rough for everyone. Thank you for your help."

"Yeah," Daniel had said.

That was all he'd managed until they got to their seats, Johnny making him go first so he sat between Johnny and the guys.

Herding.

They all did it, made sure Daniel was safely in the middle and he'd never noticed it until then. Like he'd known Dutch did it, but it wasn't until that night that he took a closer look at how the guys moved to make sure Daniel was safely surrounded. The way he'd once noticed they'd done for Johnny. The way they sat so they could keep an eye out.

It'd been automatic, with Bobby's arm around his shoulders like it was any normal day chatting with some girl sitting behind them that he knew from class, with Johnny's knee pressed against his, arm around his waist. It'd been insufferably hot out that night sitting in the stands to watch the game but he'd felt safe in the crowd with them so close that he hadn't complained, hadn't shoved them off even though part of him wanted to.

He wondered how many other things they'd dropped, how many other things they'd let go of for him.

It wasn't their job, it wasn't their duty, but they were ready just in case. And he got it.

He got why they were all putting on brave faces, because Dutch was usually the first one there. The first to show up if they needed something and they were trying to show up for him. To give him a fond bon voyage, to send him off warmly because they wanted to be happy for him first. Supportive, just like the arms that always found a way around Daniel's shoulders.

Dutch won and with a wicked grin turned to Jimmy.

"Truth or Dare."

Jimmy looked startled and frowned thoughtfully.

"Truth."

"What's happening with Jenny?"

Jimmy turned bright red. "What?"

"You heard me. You love this chick? Or is it just a crush?"

Jimmy frowned looking away.

"Do all of you have the same tell?" Daniel asked with a laugh.

"Huh?"

"Johnny also turns bright red. Especially when he tries to figure out ways to tell me how much he loves me."

Daniel caught the blush flooding Johnny's face and grinned.

"Hey-this truth or dare has nothing to do with me, or us," Johnny whispered.

"It's my favorite thing though," Daniel said leaning over and kissing his warm cheek. "I can't help it."

"It's just..." Jimmy took a deep breath and then sighed turning back to Dutch. "Fine, yes, I think I love her."

"See was it that hard to say it?"

"What? Of course it was hard to say it! I haven't said it to her! I haven't said it out loud."

"Oh come on, we say I love you all the time, it's not that hard to say," Dutch said.

"That's different."

"No it's not. Listen," Dutch said, leaning close. "I love you. I care about what happens to you and I want you to be happy and healthy."

"That's too intense."

"Is it?"

"Yes! I can't tell her that."

"I don't care what you tell her, I'm telling you , " Dutch said then

turned to the rest of them. "It goes for you all."

"We love you too Dutch," Johnny said.

Dutch leaned back with his arms over the back of the couch. "All I mean to say is, you gotta go for it Jimmy. You know what you want with your life. You want to be a lawyer, you want the picket fence, the girl and the kids. If this is the girl, you gotta keep moving forward. Kreese was full of shit, but you can't just sit on your hands with your emotions. You can't bottle them up. Do you want to be like Johnny?"

"Hey!"

"Or Daniel?"

"Excuse me?"

"Those two were head over heels in love with each other for like almost a year before they made a move, and then they didn't bone for even longer. Don't waste time Jimmy. Don't be like those two idiots."

Jimmy frowned with a hand to his chin, looking thoughtful.

"Dutch is right."

"Of course I am."

"Can I borrow your phone?"

"Yup, give your gal a call and get that ball rolling. But, hey, don't tell her you love her over the phone. That's weak as fuck, you got to tell her in person."

"Right," Jimmy said with a nod, walking over to the phone at Dutch's desk.

"I can't believe you used us as a warning ," Daniel said arms folded across his chest with a frown. "We're very happy thank you."

"I know," Dutch said. "But you two wimped out for so long. And unlike with the two of you I'm going to be far away. I can't keep an eye on him from Korea. And it's not like Bobby or Tommy have anything going on for me to really worry about."

"Hey!" Bobby complained.

"I'm very busy thank you," Tommy said.

"Sure you are," Dutch said with a knowing smile ruffling Tommy's hair. "Get a lover will ya? So I can hear all the juicy details over the phone."

"I'm going to side with Johnny on this one," Tommy said with a frown. " No juicy details."

Daniel sighed stretching then noticing a pack of cards on the table.

"Why do you have a hanafuda deck?" Daniel asked.

"I've played a couple games with Chozen and with my taekwondo teacher, though she plays it a little differently," Dutch said with a grin. "I left it out so I remember to pack it so I can play with people in Seoul."

"I didn't know Chozen played," Tommy said looking at the deck of cards.

"Yeah, everyone at Mr. Miyagi's house plays. I went over to see if they needed help with anything because I was bored and Mr. Sato roped me into playing. Chozen taught me how to play because Mr. Sato was pretty deep into the wine at that point and was mostly speaking in Okinawan and Ms. Yukie was struggling to translate. So Chozen took over and it was fun, so when I'm bored I go over to the dojo and play with Chozen."

"Ah, you've been to the dojo?" Bobby asked sounding shocked.

Daniel took Johnny's hand in his and gently rubbed his thumb over the back of it. Johnny laced their fingers together and Daniel wondered if it would be possible to see what else they could intertwine.

"Yeah Jessica talked about it a lot before she left, so I wanted to see it."

"How's it look?" Tommy asked.

"Could barely tell that I spent years of my life sweating in there," Dutch said with a grin. "It's coming along very nicely. I'm actually kind of bummed that I won't be here for the grand opening of Miyagi-do. But you know, I think it's safe, or will be safe to go to you know? He's worked really hard."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Hey Daniel, I know that look don't you dare think of sneaking off to another room with Johnny."

Daniel felt his face burn as he was caught, watched Johnny turn to look at him and then turn bright red at the realization and turned to look at Dutch.

"What?"

"I know you too well Mister. Dial it back. I'm sure you weren't gone that long just for snacks too. So I hope you at least cleaned up."

Bobby and Tommy burst out laughing and Daniel sighed rubbing his face.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah seriously. You're really easy to read. You've got like all your needs on your face. Pissed, hungry, horny."

"Hey that's not all I feel."

"Yeah but it's usually one of those three. Though honestly, usually the last one."

"Speaking of hungry," Johnny said quickly. "Mr. Miyagi and everyone gave us a dinner to bring you."

"Huh?" Dutch asked.

Daniel leaned against Johnny grateful for the quick change of subject, even if Dutch was right, he didn't like that he was that easy to read.

"I was also given a note," Johnny said digging through his jacket pocket and passing the sealed letter over.

Dutch took it carefully, his carefree teasing smile fading into a serious look.

"What? Why?" Dutch asked, voice barely a whisper as he opened the envelope.

"I know we just had a snack, but want me to go prepare the dinner? It'll take a bit," Johnny asked. "I can take all the guys. I'll keep them from making trouble."

"Yeah, thanks," Dutch said softly holding the letter carefully.

Johnny stood slowly shooing everyone out the door including Jimmy who had just finished his call.

"Why would I make trouble," Bobby asked as he was pulled from the room.

"What's the big deal?" Jimmy asked.

"Probably some heart felt Miyagi wisdom," Daniel said.

"Oh, you think so? I'm a little surprised," Tommy said.

"Why? He just said he's been hanging out with Mr. Miyagi," Bobby said.

"Yeah but I didn't expect a letter. Or food."

"The food was more of a combined effort," Johnny said as they walked down the hall and down another spiral staircase back to the kitchen.

"Every time you turn a corner in this place I find something even more intense then before," Jimmy said rushing to an oven. "These are massive. You could bake almost anything in there."

"Don't fall in Hansel," Johnny said opening up a fridge and pulling out things that he handed to Daniel.

Daniel recognized the containers as Mr. Miyagi's.

He watched Johnny move through the kitchen like he knew where everything was, handling food like he knew what to do.

When had that happened?

When had Johnny gone from not knowing how to cut a tomato and letting Daniel guide him through cooking in the cabin to knowing his way around a kitchen and being entrusted by Mr. Miyagi and Yukie to cook?

Hell, Johnny cooked for him and it was good.

He still sometimes daydreamed about his Valentine's day mac and cheese.

He just had loved teaching Johnny.

He'd liked how studious he was and the chance to teach him

something new, the excuse to be close.

Louie had seen through him on that and Johnny had played along. But Yukie had beat him to it. Taught him how to cook.

He was glad Johnny felt comfortable in the kitchen. It was wonderful the nights that Daniel came home tired and hungry and dinner was waiting for him.

Daniel did like that, Johnny waiting for him at home. He didn't understand why his professors complained about someone waiting for them at home.

Daniel loved it. Loved the way Johnny smiled at him, welcoming him home. He loved welcoming Johnny home too.

He liked having a home.

Wasn't that the point?

Being excited to go home?

To get off work and spend the journey home looking forward to being home?

To making love in your bed?

Or relaxing in front of the TV curled up together watching a show you both enjoy?

Or catching up over a meal?

Someone who listened and talked?

Someone with their own ideas to share?

Someone you loved?

Daniel felt hands on his shoulders.

"Man, you really got it bad huh?"

Daniel looked at Bobby who grinned, arm around him.

"Makes me happy actually."

"Huh?"

"Well a lot really. But this," he tapped his index finger to Daniel's chest. "The fact you both look at each other with those lovey dovey gooey eyes. I'm glad he's got you and you've got him. I was worried you know. We all were. After Silver and us moving to college and with Dutch leaving. But I mean the way you look at him, I don't know, I'm not as worried. One less thing to worry about you know?"

Daniel got it. Or he thought he did. He still worried a lot. About a lot of things. But how he felt wasn't one of them.

"What all did he make?" Tommy asked Johnny watching him unwrap things and reheat different things on the stove top and in the oven.

"Well he and Sato and Yukie went out fishing. Like out out, and then whatever they didn't catch Chozen went to a store to get. It's a lot of seafood. So I was given very specific instructions," Johnny said as he moved about the kitchen. "They gave me some stuff to make as well. Like Sato wanted me to steam some clams in sake," Johnny said opening a bottle of sake.

"They tried to catch an eel but it was too slippery and Yukie stopped Chozen from buying one because it wasn't as fresh as she wanted, so they went with catfish, so that is catfish kabayaki. This," Johnny said taking packets of foil and sticking them in the oven "is miso butter mushrooms and glazed eggplant and there's a jar of pickled ginger Chozen made in the fridge. This is Chanko Nabe which they kind of argued about because it's for sumo wrestlers I guess? But it's got shrimp and crab and a whole lot of meat in it because Yukie was adamant about it," Johnny said carefully taking a pot and setting it on the stove. "They did not however do desert because I told them Bobby always does. But it's a lot of food."

"I did! I made a pina colada inspired bunt cake," Bobby said. "I wanted to send him off with something tropical."

"That sounds good," Daniel said tilting his head to look back at Bobby.

"You like coconut?"

"Yeah."

"Then you'll love it."

"Does he have snacks for the flight?" Jimmy asked going through the cabinets curiously. "I mean I brought stuff, but like sometimes they don't feed you enough. Is he flying commercial or privately? Economic

or first class."

"First class, his parents insisted," Johnny said.

"Oh then he should be fine. But I'll still give him his snacks," Jimmy said.

"You checked with customs right?" Tommy asked.

"Of course I checked with customs, no matter how much law I try and shove in my brain to drum out food and beverage customs rules it always just pops right back up," Jimmy said with a sigh, watching Johnny cook.

"Look at you," Tommy said patting Johnny's back. "Remember when you couldn't boil an egg?"

"I could boil an egg, I just couldn't make fancy soft boiled eggs like you like," Johnny said then frowned tilting his head. "Actually still don't know how to do that."

"Daniel could probably teach you," Bobby said giving Daniel a squeeze. "Right Daniel?"

"Yeah, I mean it's just timing," Daniel said.

"It smells great."

Daniel turned seeing Dutch who ruffled his hair as he passed. "Look at you Johnny."

"Okay okay I get it," Johnny said with a sigh.

"I mean I wasn't worried because you live with Daniel and I've eaten leftovers at your place."

"Aha so you admit it!"

"What? Your leftovers are good!" Dutch said with a shrug. "I can't believe Mr. Miyagi and well, his household I guess, made all this for me."

"Well for us, but to celebrate you," Johnny said checking on the stew. "You're timing is good actually, where do you want to eat? It's almost all done."

"How about in your favorite spot?" Dutch asked.

"Green house?"

"Better then the dining room."

"Very very true," Johnny said with a look of distaste before turning to Jimmy and Tommy. "You guys mind putting on oven mitts and helping me carry stuff?"

"Uh sure."

"Where are the oven mitts?"

"Third drawer on your right Jimmy."

"Daniel mind getting drinks? Bobby your dessert? Dutch silverware and plates?"

"Aye aye captain," Dutch said with a laugh.

"Drinks again huh? I can lift heavy things you know."

"I know," Johnny said with a grin.

"Aha, sneaky bad joke, that doesn't even work," Bobby said with a laugh.

"Huh?"

"Well Johnny's too tall, but isn't it some flirty joke housewives do? That he's a tall drink of water?" Bobby asked.

"I didn't even make the actual joke," Johnny said.

"But I know you, I know that's why you keep making Daniel get drinks huh? Terrible flirting that doesn't make any sense. But it amuses you."

"Yes, it does," Johnny said smile.

"At least you're entertaining someone, even if it's dumb and yourself," Bobby said rolling his eyes. "Good luck with that one," he said to Daniel before heading off to get his cake.

It took a bit of time and a few more trips but they managed to set up dinner in the green house. The temperature was pleasant and it smelled nice with all the flowers in bloom.

Johnny explained what everything was as the guys filled their plates

and it was nice to see him confident with the food. It wasn't new, but it was a new setting.

He looked nice amongst the flowers and the lush green plants setting up the meal.

He looked, happy.

Daniel had seen Johnny interacting with the guys a lot.

He'd watched them at school, the way they hung off each other in the parking lot around their bikes, the way they laughed and chatted at lunch.

But it seemed back to normal, finally, after all that time. The slow steps they'd taken in New York and now it was all hands on.

He might admit to himself he was a little jealous watching him with his sleeves rolled up filling plates and bowls with food and blonde hair tucked behind his ear while he talked and the guys listened. But he was surprised at how hard his heart was pounding.

Sure, he'd thought he wanted to be with Johnny for a long time. He knew Johnny was planning to be around for a long time but his hands were sweaty and itchy.

He wanted to grab Johnny's hand and not let go. He didn't want to just live together in a nice house.

He wanted to celebrate it.

He wanted to do what his parents had done.

He wanted to buy a ring and have a fancy ceremony and see Johnny stand in front of everyone they knew and loved and cared for and see how he responded to him saying that he loved Johnny again.

In front of everyone.

He'd thought marriage was okay.

He hadn't really focused on it.

It was a ceremony, a tradition, and it seemed more work than he thought it was worth.

His parents had done it and he liked looking at the photos, of the

giant party they had but the pricing just seemed ridiculous. Why bother?

But standing next to Johnny, in a nice suit, or a wedding dress...he wouldn't be able to talk Johnny into that in front of people, but it'd be a nice daydream.

But to celebrate love?

That would be nice and he liked to think about it sometimes.

The cake he knew. But what Johnny wore changed. The decor changed. What he'd say changed.

It'd be nice to have a ring. So that the times Johnny was by himself people would know.

Taken.

Off the market.

He wanted to pick out flowers, pick out a baker and still taste cakes even though he was still set on that one flavor. He wanted to have a nice party to show how far they'd come. And, he wanted the honeymoon.

He wanted a sex vacation that was expected.

No friends, no family, just the two of them at a nice hotel in some place they wanted to see together.

Explore together, the town, the culture, each other.

He wanted to marry Johnny. And the sudden serious realization of it settled cold in his gut.

It'd been an occasional thought for a while that flitted back in. Especially when he walked past wedding decorations and parties. But it wasn't possible. His mom talked about it sometimes. Places where they could be "partners" but not married. He hadn't thought it was something he wanted that badly, he didn't even know if it was something Johnny wanted, but he wanted it now .

He didn't want to drive off to Vegas and elope, but he wanted the option. He wanted choices. He wanted a piece of paper with their names on it together. He wanted to kiss Johnny in front of a crowd that came there to see him do exactly that. He wanted to see the guys

in suits, crying because of course they would.

He wanted forever.

Something sharp hit his thigh and Daniel yelped looking at Mrs. P who'd snuck up on him looking around at the food on his plate and for any dropped food.

"Seriously? Are you like a dog? What do you want?"

"Did she get you?" Dutch asked.

"Yeah," Daniel sighed. "I don't think she broke skin or anything, mostly she just shocked me."

"Well she wants to sit in your lap and eat your food," Dutch said. "It's what Mr. P is trying to do right now too."

"Huh? Where's he?" Jimmy asked.

"Here," Dutch said moving one of the plates and Daniel could see Mr. P's head at table height eyeing all of the food.

"Is this normal?"

"Not always, but there hasn't been...well I haven't really had a lot of friends in here before so I think their curious."

"I got pecked out of curiosity?"

"Probably."

"You also might've gotten pecked because she wants to steal your food. Not that she'd really enjoy any of this, or should have any of it. So don't give her any. They both eat like royalty. They have a dietitian who comes by to check on them and adjust their diet," Dutch said as Mr. P stepped away from the table and to circle around them watching.

"So there's a chance we're going to keep getting pecked?" Tommy asked with a frown.

"We?" Daniel asked. "So far it's just me."

"No, they really don't peck that much, I mean sometimes, but it's not hard, it's like a hello?" Dutch said. "I mean they like to go for Johnny's ankles sometimes but that's like a game, a really bad habit they have

with him."

"A bad habit? And who gave them that bad habit?" Johnny asked eyes checking in with Daniel that he was okay.

Daniel gave his hand a gentle affirmative squeeze.

"I didn't start it."

"We were in here and you were bored and you kept kicking at my ankles-"

"Not hard, I didn't do any damage."

"No, but Mr. and Mrs. P saw you and decided it looked like fun and now I got to wear thick socks when I visit or be on guard for pecking birds."

"He was wearing these pants that were too short you know? Like they were jeans but they didn't go all the way down and you could see his ankles and I was talking to him about how in the Victorian era during the day time that was a no no for women's fashion and was teasing him about how it wasn't night time yet, so why was he showing off his ankles? Had his pants shrunk?"

"I hadn't cleaned my closet in a bit and they still fit," Johnny said. "They just were a bit short. I mean I wear shorts at gym so I didn't see what the problem was. But Dutch entertained himself on that for most of the afternoon. And then because Mr. and Mrs. P keep a close eye on Dutch they followed suit. And now one afternoon of teasing has led to years worth of birds continuing said teasing."

"And surprisingly they don't peck everyone's ankles, it's just dependent on their mood. But Johnny, it's how they greet him now, little game of can I give him a kiss on the ankles before he notices I'm there and jumps away ?"

"You think that's what they're doing? Giving me a greeting that's a hello kiss? Because I'm pretty sure they're being brats."

"He doesn't mean that," Dutch said turning to Mr. P. "He knows you guys like him."

Mr. P ruffled his feathers and wandered off. Quiet fell their table for a moment longer than Daniel expected and he looked around, at the wavering.

"I'm kind of bummed," Tommy said moving food around his plate.

"Tommy," Bobby hissed elbowing him.

"No," Tommy said moving. "Johnny's been here enough that the peacocks know him. But this is my third time here. Over five years of friendship, practically inseparable, and three times. It bums me out. Especially since you're leaving."

"Yeah, I get that," Dutch said. "But honestly it's not fun here. It's always just been me. My parents are rarely here and because I bit so much as a child the staff avoid me. It's better to be at your place, you know? Less echoy and quiet. I'd rather hang out there then here. Because when you leave I just suffocate in the silence. Every time Johnny left it was just somehow bigger, somehow quieter. My parents didn't like guests, they worried over every little thing and Johnny only got past that because he's...I don't know a dumbass? Like he saw this place and didn't give a shit. He also didn't really know what a Ming vase was or a Fabergé egg or any of that and I guess my parents liked his personality."

"Hey."

"Like you guys are too...smart and knowledgeable for them… at least when we were younger."

"Are you saying we got dumber?" Bobby asked.

"No? Yes? I don't know. I think my parents got chiller because of Johnny. Like they're still a pain, but I would've never guessed they'd have let all of you spend the night before. Wouldn't have dreamed of it," Dutch said. "I mean I wish I could've had you over more, but like while my parents aren't Sid, they did have the ability to just ship me off to another boarding school. I mean they didn't care whether I was home or not, just so long as random other people weren't here unsupervised and they didn't trust me to supervise if that makes sense. It took a lot of effort to get them to let me go to public school with you all and not some dumb boarding school in Europe which they wanted me to do for high school. And I didn't want to lose that...or you."

"You wouldn't have lost us. I'm sure we could've scrounged up money to sneak into whatever fancy boarding school you got sent to," Jimmy said.

"Just like we'll do to visit you in Seoul after you get settled in," Bobby

said. "I'm expecting you to play tour guide and translator you know?"

"Yeah I figured," Dutch said.

Dinner turned into questions about Dutch's trip.

It was like watching someone try and walk on ice for the first time, carefully feeling for cracks, scared of falling.

Johnny asked about plans, things he was excited to see, Bobby asked about food, what he wanted to eat, just little things. Was he ready? How was his Korean lessons going? Was he still doing okay in Taekwondo or was he getting his ass kicked?

Eventually the sun began to set and the lights in the greenhouse flicked on and Johnny started cleaning up, being careful of Mr. Miyagi's containers and pots and pans.

"What times your flight?" Daniel asked as they walked back to the mansion.

The lights in the garden had flickered on and it was a different type of beautiful. The fountain was going and there were string lights everywhere.

"I'm taking Korean Air around 12:30, I'll get into Seoul nearly 13 hours later at 5:20pm the next day. They're ahead of us, time wise."

"Call when you get in," Johnny said.

"It'll be like 1am here," Dutch said.

"I'll be awake," Johnny said.

"You should be in bed at 1am," Dutch said. "You go to the shop at like 6am."

"Not always, and Mr. Miyagi knows you're leaving. Sato and Yukie are helping out."

Dutch frowned wrapping an arm around Daniel. "You going to be up at 1am?"

"If he's up I'll be up," Daniel said.

"Seriously?" Dutch asked amused.

"If he wakes up, usually I wake up shortly after," Daniel said with a shrug. "I don't get it either."

"Based on how you two sleep that makes sense," Jimmy said with a laugh.

"You do sleep like you're keeping him locked in place. If he even tried to roll over I figure that would wake you up," Tommy said.

"Yeah I don't know how you can sleep like that," Bobby said. "Sleeping next to him is fine, and honestly he doesn't move much, but I feel like I'd just accidentally roll over and smack him."

"Probably because you have done that, you can't stay still. You move around a lot," Johnny said.

"No I don't."

"You definitely do," Dutch said. "We stopped trying to fit more than two people in a bed at Johnny's specifically because you can't sleep well with others and beat people up in your sleep."

"It only works if you're on the end and Johnny's on your other side. He's the only one who will suffer through it."

"No way," Bobby said turning to Johnny. "I don't, do I?"

"Yeah, you do. You do like sleep karate."

" No ," Bobby said. "What are we going to do tonight?"

"You're sleeping on an end. So if you beat someone up we can just push you off the bed." Jimmy said.

"What? No, I was fine at Johnny's the last time though. And I don't beat you all up when we're sleeping on the floor right?"

"Well no, because we move out of reach," Tommy said.

"What about when I was drunk at your place Jimmy?"

"Oh drunk, you're too like weighed down to move. Then you just talk."

"How could you all not tell me this?"

"You have siblings we thought you knew."

"That's why they don't run to me when they have nightmares any more," Bobby whispered.

He had a horrified look on his face like his whole world had just been turned inside out. Which meant when they got back to the room and dug out the other board games Bobby was the first out every time. Occasionally he leaned over to ask Tommy something but Daniel wasn't sure what.

He tried holding onto the moments, collecting every thing he wanted to say and to soak up every story, every joke, every shared memory of them, all together for the last time...for a while. But before he knew it he was curling up next to Johnny in a big bed, wondering how much he'd let slip past.

If he should've said more or done more.

Daniel stood at the gate. They'd parked, carried his bags and now they were standing around waiting for his flight to Incheon to be called.

The air was tense.

Tommy had already run off to the bathroom feigning indigestion only to come back with puffy eyes. No one wanted to be the first to break and it was the worst heavy feeling.

Fuck it.

Daniel didn't know if it was leftover from Cobra Kai, some Kreese thing about crying and manliness, or if they just were being stubborn. But he didn't care.

He'd break first, it was fine.

Daniel threw his arms around Dutch and hugged him tight. Tighter then he had before.

"I'm going to miss you," Daniel said.

He wasn't going to hold it in. He didn't care.

Dutch had been there.

He'd dragged Daniel out of bed when he didn't want to get out of bed, when all he wanted to do was stay glued to Johnny. He got him

moving, kept him going. He pretended to be Daniel's boyfriend when Silver showed up to do who knows what at the club.

He made Daniel sound popular and cool while keeping him safe from a dangerous situation.

Dutch was leaving, going on some adventure in Seoul. He was going to study and Daniel wouldn't see him as much.

He wouldn't show up on campus with his ugly van pretending it was cool, a van that Daniel could spot a mile a way and had grown fond of because they had so many adventures in it together.

He was going to miss the terrible music choices and the stale weed smell and listening to the guys talk while sitting in the back with Johnny on the way to some spot they'd all enjoy.

It was full of memories, from that trip out to the mountains where he got to sleep in Johnny's lap and by his side, to every sports game imaginable, to trips to the beach, out to fancy restaurants, to the mall, the arcade, the zoo and aquarium.

They went everywhere.

When they had said they were going to make it up to Daniel they'd meant it. 6 months of terror and pain and then Daniel was pulled into the back of a van, equally terrifying but only to be given snacks and fancy drinks.

He'd spent 6 months doing little else but train. He'd barely seen LA. He'd kept close to home, close to Mr. Miyagi or Ali like they were shields. And they, the cobras, his cobras, made sure he saw everything else.

Friend dates. Making up for lost time. Welcoming him and annoying him, not leaving him alone. They hadn't been able to touch Johnny out of fear of setting him off so they touched Daniel instead.

How many times had he seen the way they hung off of each other in the parking lot or around school, that tactile friendship he hadn’t had? He’d wondered about it, felt jealous for it. But it was like seeing a poisonous snake, colorful and beautiful but dangerous.

Now he was a part of it. Arms that leaned against his shoulders, around his waist like they were keeping him from running off but more like they were keeping him grounded and safe. He wasn't sure

when exactly that switch had flipped, out of terror of how close they got to a relief that they were there. But he was grateful. Grateful to have had them when he needed them most.

He never would have expected, in a million years, how important that angry bleach blonde cobra would be. He wouldn't have expected to have been fond of any of them. They all surprised him. But Dutch, he was a secret lynch pin. He wasn't afraid to be blunt but in a way that showed he cared. He called Daniel out on his bullshit yet kept turning around to make sure he was there and would go back and get him if he dragged too far behind, tired from running and training and life.

He snapped Daniel out of his spirals while they were on campus. Digging around and finding whatever was bothering him and with precision he thought only a select few had, got to the root of the problem and yanked Daniel back into reality, out of his issues.

He didn't laugh at Daniel's secret goals. Like wanting to get strong enough to pick Johnny up. He didn't ask why. Dutch listened when he complained. He just seemed to understand. Like of course Daniel wanted to pick Johnny up. That was normal. Not like Louie who laughed at him when he mentioned it. And kept laughing. For too long.

Dutch recommended exercises and gyms, college clubs to join and he teased but in a loving manner. Made him flex while on campus and then pointed out the looks Daniel hadn't realized were directed his way.

He was a balm, a salve, and he had Daniel's back.

He cared, he had a bigger heart then Daniel had expected or ever had realized. He'd seen that his friend had a crush and had jumped into action, hadn't questioned it. Johnny had liked Daniel and the cobras had gone to work trying to win Daniel over, and they had. He accepted that his life was going to include these four.

He complained, sure, a lot. But he was going to miss having breakfast with Dutch, watching him drive Louie nuts over breakfast, seeing him at the shop leaning over the counter and laughing with Johnny and helping Mr. Miyagi. He was going to miss their friendship.

Dutch was wild. But Daniel knew without a doubt how much Dutch loved them. He loved his friends so much. Those dumb ex cobras. But they weren't just Johnny's friends. They were also his friends. Dutch was his friend. And Dutch loved him. And maybe he needed to say

that. They said it all the time. But had he said it? Had he told Dutch how grateful he was? How much he appreciated everything he'd done? How much he cared about him?

"I love you you know? Like I don't know if you know that. I may complain, rolling over in bed and finding you there because you snuck in in the middle of the night with your spare key, but I don't hate it. I mean maybe just a little. But I want to say a couple things. One, thank you. Thank you for staying by my side. I don't know...I don't know how bad Silver would've been without you, I don't even want to think about it. If I hadn't had you by my side heckling him almost every step of the way. If I hadn't had you running and training with me after Jessica left…

“Thank you for being my fairy godparent for prom, for finding places where I can dance with Johnny, for having my back this whole time. Thank you for making up excuses to come see me at school and having coffee with me after class. Thank you for keeping me grounded while also stroking my ego.

“I'm an only child. I have a big family but I'm it. When I moved here it was my mom and me and that was it. And I hated it. I hated all of you. But now, now you're like my brother. I love you and I know you love me and I know you've got my back and I hope that you know I've got yours. That I'm excited for your journey and to visit you and to hear all about it. I'm excited to welcome you home whenever you come home and to drive you nuts just like you drive me nuts. I'm grateful for your long chats, your wisdom, your terrible and wonderful ideas and trying your food.

“I'm grateful that you decided you wanted me to be a part of your little family whether Johnny and I got together or not. Because I'm so happy to be a part of it. To hang out with you and the guys and your absence is going to be like a gaping hole in my heart, but I know it'll be okay because you've left me in good hands.

“I've got Johnny and Bobby and Jimmy and Tommy. And they have me. I'll keep them safe. I know Louie would laugh at me saying that but you know how much I mean it. I mean I think that's why we get along so well now. Were both a little wild. I'm also proud of you. It's not easy finding things you like to do or what you want to do. I mean I'm not always sure I'm making the right choices. And you're taking a chance. Whether you love it and stay there a long time, or hate it and come back home, not matter what you do I'm proud of you.

“I looked at all those paintings you know? At your house and you know the biggest difference in them from the start to now? You look happy. You found your happiness and maybe it's a bit self important and egotistical to say it's because of us. But I do believe you're happier because you found these dorks and me. You're figuring yourself out and you're taking your own path and you're cool. Like really cool. And I'm so proud of you for taking that leap. For going after something you want, after spending so long taking care of us. Helping us move, helping my mom move, showing up for so many things you never had to do but you did automatically. Your actions speak so loud so I know even if you don't say it, that you love us too," Daniel said, eyes burning and tears running down his face.

"Bastard," Dutch said, his voice wavering and scratchy, thick from tears, but he held Daniel just as fiercely. "You know, I didn't know what I was getting into with you. But even though you kicked my ass at the tournament in a badass way I figured you'd be cool on some level. I just didn't expect you to bond so well with us. I didn't expect to care so damn much about what you did or who you were or worry so much when your bad luck and penchant for danger spiked.

“I worried myself sick while you were in Okinawa, but I knew Johnny and Mr. Miyagi were there and we had shit to do here. To make things better for Johnny. And every time I saw Silver I wanted to punch him in the face because he gave me the creeps. I'm proud of you you bastard, for always getting back up. Like you say I helped you up? Nah. You're usually already getting back up, I just pull you up a little faster. You're also stronger than you look and I wish you had more confidence in that, but you're working on it and I'm proud of you for it. You will sweep Johnny off his feet at one point some day and it's going to be delightful. I bet he'll scream," Dutch said quietly so only Daniel could hear.

"And I'm grateful that you're here to keep him safe. He needs someone who loves him as fiercely as you do. Someone who teaches him how to be a person and not just someone who bends over backwards for everyone or tries to fit into the molds he's been given that aren’t him. You're helping him break those molds and become himself. And I know he'll be safe with you keeping and eye out for him and he'll keep an eye out for you. So I'm not worried about leaving.

“I'm just going to miss you all. So much. It's kind of...terrifying to go somewhere so far away from all of you. Because whenever I got lonely and whenever I got sad I could just pop over and visit someone and fuck around. And I did it all the time. But now I won't have all those

places to go to. And I'll miss you too. And fine, yes love you too. All of you. Stop looking at me like that. If you're going to stand there crying you might as well give me a hug."

Daniel wondered what they looked like. Six barely adult men sobbing in the international terminal by the gates. He doubted it looked normal, probably a little strange, but he didn't care. Dutch was leaving. An important part of their family was going overseas and had no plans yet to return.

They wouldn't known that five of those men had spent most of their teenage years together, having each others backs unknowingly poisoned by someone they trusted and helping each other heal but bottling it up at every turn. They didn't know that Daniel had been bullied by them but then befriended. Won over when he looked beneath the surface and actually got to know them. When they finally let him in.

That they'd had his back during the worst times of his life. That these men listened to him when he talked about his dad, which very few people did, who didn't just befriend him, but made themselves such a deeply rooted part of his life that Mr. Miyagi cared about them, his mom cared about them, Louie thought they were cool and even his Chozen hung out with them.

No one knew how much they'd gone through, together. No one knew how hard it'd been when Bobby, Jimmy, and Tommy had gone off to college and left Daniel, Dutch and Johnny behind. Even though it wasn't far. This was that wound but bigger, more jagged and it was bleeding, an open wound that would ache and hurt for a while.

The only way to heal it would be to carefully stitch it up and call. To talk as much as they could. Write letters and then get on that plane themselves to go visit him. Daniel wasn't scared that Dutch would pull away, that he'd get lost in his new life in Korea and forget them. He wasn't worried about distance or their friendship fading. Because Dutch wasn't like that, the friendship had good roots, the kind of roots that lasted a lifetime and he felt so damn lucky to have gotten to live and grow in the same garden.

It was too soon when Dutch had to pull away, the final call, to board his flight. He looked back once, waved with a tearful smile and they stood watching from the window as his plane left.

"We going to the beach?" Jimmy asked, voice tight and hoarse

sounding.

"I could use some ice cream," Tommy whispered.

"Yeah, me too."

Chapter End Notes

The games the guys played
Conspiracy
Trivial Pursuit
Aggravation

How to play Hwatu , the Korean version of Hanafuda

The food Miyagi and co sent and Bobby made
Catfish Kabayaki
Sake steamed clams
miso butter mushrooms
chanko nabe sumo stew
pina colada cake

The deodorant thing is almost always on the top of any packing list for moving to South Korea. Source: myself and regretting not packing enough and having to go on adventures to find it. 🤦

Frankenstein, who am I?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chozen leaned against the counter setting down a cup of coffee for Johnny.

"Thank you," Johnny said.

"I heard Daniel's out of town," Chozen said.

"Yeah, he's at a convention with his classmates. They're learning business models and finance stuff I think?"

"Apartment must be lonely."

"Definitely quieter," Johnny said. "Louie's staying with Lucille until Daniel get's back."

Chozen smiled. "Well if you get too lonely-"

"Thank you, it's probably good for me to get a weekend to myself."

"Will you have enough to eat?"

Johnny smiled softly. "Yukie taught me to cook and Mr. Miyagi and I went fishing last weekend. We're well stocked, no need to worry. Plus every time I think I finish the food Abuela brings over I find more in the freezer. "

"Well I'm around if you need anything," Chozen said lifting up his coffee and tapping it against Johnny's before wishing Mr. Miyagi well and heading out.

Johnny got home and set his keys is the dish and put his bag down.

"I'm home," he said with a smile to the bonsai walking past them and opening up the cupboards.

He pulled out a rice cooker and set it on the counter removing the inner bowl and carefully scooping out a cupful of rice and listening to it scatter into the bowl, he rinsed the rice off and filled it up, returning

it to the cooker, replacing the lid and pushing the button.

He walked to the fridge, pulling out one of the fish he'd caught with Mr. Miyagi.

He hadn't thought he'd enjoy fishing. But there was something peaceful about it. Just sitting in a boat with Mr. Miyagi in the early morning. Sometimes Sato joined them but not too frequently. They didn't do it too often, but whenever Mr. Miyagi invited Johnny he always said yes. Because he knew sometimes Mr. Miyagi wanted to be alone and liked that time to be alone and think, but other times he wanted to talk, he wanted someone with him, and sometimes he got lonely.

Johnny never brought it up, but he thought, maybe, just maybe, Mr. Miyagi would think about how he went fishing with his father, with his grandfather and would think of that son he should've been fishing with. And sometimes he wanted to fish and think of those ghosts. Other times he wanted to pass that skill on, that tradition. And Johnny was honored that Mr. Miyagi picked him in those moments. Even if Johnny was wrong. Even if he wasn't Mr. Miyagi's first choice, but Daniel was so busy with school and his apprenticeship that Johnny still was happy to be his third choice.

He set about preparing the fish, filling a pan with oil and cooking it, making his sauce, working on his soup, humming along with the radio he'd turned on.

It was quiet.

A rarity.

Daniel was usually home for dinner. Or someone else was over. Or Louie was around. But Louie was at Lucille's while Daniel was out of town. Johnny had said it was okay but Lucille had laughed and said he should enjoy some peace and quiet. A home not full of LaRusso's was strange. A new adjustment.

He had his night planned out. He'd eat dinner, watch a movie he'd rented on his way home from work, take a shower, read his book and go to bed. A simple night.

Maybe he was boring.

But Dutch was gone and it was the middle of the week and the guys were a bit too far for an impromptu hang out, he didn’t want to bother

them if they had classes or homework, dates and plans. And he didn't want to bother Chozen. Plus he had to learn how to live with himself. To get comfortable being on his own again. He hadn't really been a lone in a very long time. But Daniel couldn't stay glued to his hip for the rest of their lives. He'd have important business meetings and events. And Johnny was going to have to be able to withstand being alone.

It seemed easy. He'd been so used to just having himself for so long but now it felt weird.

He missed Daniel. Missed the sound of his footsteps, of him talking, moving around the apartment. Sometimes their apartment felt too small even though that felt silly because Johnny had lived in such smaller places. But he realized now that Daniel was such an important presence, a presence that found him no matter where he went in the apartment.

He could be in bed, their decent sized bed and Daniel wouldn't sleep anywhere but intertwined with him. If he couldn't sleep and moved to the couch, something that was becoming a rarity it only took a half hour before that woke Daniel up, being alone in bed and he found him on the couch.

Someone might find it suffocating. But it was comforting. Even if Daniel came into the bathroom sometimes while he was showering to brush his teeth and talk. As if he had been holding in all his words throughout the day waiting to shower Johnny in them.

Sometimes Johnny thought he was trying to escape Louie. Wanting a bit of peace from his cousin who had a thousand questions as soon as he came in through the door. And if Johnny was in the shower then Daniel could hide in there too. Amongst the steam and sit on the counter and talk.

Johnny had asked once if Daniel wanted to join and Daniel had said Louie would for sure hear then. And then his aunt would yell at him. Johnny had said they could try to be quiet and Daniel had gotten a look in his eye he didn't understand and he flatly said "No, never again."

His stomach had done a somersault at that. Because he'd gotten it. He wanted to hear Johnny and not stifle him. And he'd looked away burning red at a loss for words.

When his food finished cooking he moved over to the table and sat in

his seat and looked across at the empty chair.

He got up, went into the bedroom and got the giant whale shark and set it in the chair.

He'd asked Daniel if he wanted to take it with him and Daniel had said that no one went to an academic conference with a plush animal that big. And then had softly patted the whale sharks head, besides you might need him more.

Johnny frowned. It wasn't enough.

He turned his focus instead on the bonsai. He moved them ever so slightly, blocking the view of the empty chairs and talked quietly to them about his day while he picked up his chopsticks and plopped a bit of fluffy rice onto his tongue.

The apartment felt too quiet to speak loudly in.

He wondered what Daniel was doing.

He hoped he was having fun.

Daniel needed some fun.

It was like he always just threw himself into something new. All in. Daniel was completely focused on learning everything there was to learn about cars and business. Even though Johnny didn't like his apprenticeship.

He hadn't said anything yet. But the guy, the owner out in Tarzana, seemed to take advantage of what essentially was Daniel's free labor. Scheduling him to work for long stints of time. And Daniel came home exhausted.

Johnny didn't like it. But Daniel seemed determined. He had a million excuses. That this is what he'd be doing no matter who he apprenticed with and even though the owner was hard on him he was on everyone. And he was the best in the area.

Being the best didn't mean you had to be a jackass. Johnny understood the irony of him saying that and so he didn't. Instead gently pushed Daniel to do more school stuff. The school stuff Daniel wanted to do but waffled on.

Like this trip.

Daniel liked his classmates, his professors, he liked his school. And he deserved that experience of being just a regular college kid. Even if he was anything but regular. He was amazing and Johnny enjoyed that secret fact. That there were all these people who were meeting Daniel for the first time and would slowly discover it for themselves.

It didn't mean though, that he wasn't lonely. That he didn't miss Daniel. Even though it felt ridiculous.

He'd left just that morning.

How ridiculous was he?

That he couldn't handle this?

He'd spent nights without Daniel before. Hell it was just dinner so far. He'd spent that alone plenty of times as Daniel went out with his classmates or had dinner with his mom or worked late at the awful apprenticeship.

Maybe it was selfish. To be lonely.

Daniel deserved a chance to have fun on his own. And maybe it was just a compounding of them growing up, taking those steps into adulthood that were separate. He knew they were coming. He'd been the one to comfort Daniel about it. There was going to be more of it.

There'd be work trips. There'd be all sorts of things they'd do separately. It wouldn't be like high school, or that summer in Okinawa or their time together at Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees.

Daniel was going to grow up and he was going to soar. Just like the cobras. And Johnny... Johnny was going to just stay home and talk to their bonsai and eat dinner alone.

The phone rang.

"Pardon me," he told the bonsai getting up and answering the phone.

"Hello?"

"It's me."

Johnny carried the phone back to the table with him.

"Me who?" he said putting as much confusion as he could into his voice, smiling, amused, sitting back down.

He heard a huff breathed through the receiver. "Who all would you be expecting phone calls from?"

"Well it's a Wednesday night. Could be my mom."

"I'm not your mom."

"Oh definitely not. Her voice is higher and I've never heard her sound annoyed over the phone. Could be a maintenance guy."

"You fix everything! What is there for a maintenance guy to do?"

"Well some things are best left to the professionals. Could be a car repair guy."

"Did you get into an accident?" concern flooded through the phone.

"Oh no, but it's around the time I should be doing regular maintenance for the Avanti."

"So what your car repair guy calls and gives you reminders like a dentist harassing you about your teeth cleaning?"

Johnny laughed. "No. Hmm. Could be a friend."

"Johnny, you know it's me."

"I know. How was the drive?" Johnny asked carefully shifting the phone into the crook of his shoulder as he ate, moving the receiver away so Daniel wouldn't have to listen but he could still hear Daniel.

"Awful. I didn't leave when I should've and got stuck in traffic for hours. Next time remind me that it's not worth it."

"I won't."

"What? Why not?"

"Because you're going to meet people and have a good time. Hard work and skill get you so far, sadly rubbing elbows with a bunch of people you don't know and exchanging business cards and small talk in stuffy rooms over over priced meals and wine get you a lot farther faster."

"I want to rub elbows with you."

Johnny laughed. "What does that even mean?"

"I don't know. What are you doing? Are you eating? Let me guess, ham? Fried baloney?"

"I made fish. Teriyaki salmon, some miso soup and rice. What did you have for dinner?"

"Dry steak, I'd rather be eating with you," Daniel complained. "I had to drown the steak in A1 sauce. What a waste."

"Are you at least having a good time with your classmates?" Johnny asked.

Daniel sighed. The more Johnny listened the more he was pretty sure Daniel was a little drunk.

Which made sense.

His classmates liked going to the bars, liked drinking, found amusement at Daniel's youthful face getting them stopped and then once Daniel opened his mouth, once he started talking about the mechanics of a car, or something the bartender or bouncer didn't think a kid would know in such detailed they'd let him through. He wasn't 21 yet, but once he started dropping knowledge he got in. At least one of the places the guy asked for Daniel's business card, wanting to get his car fixed.

Johnny had tried to tell him that might solve all his issues, if he had professional business cards. But Daniel said all he could put on them was apprentice and student which Johnny disagreed with.

Karate champion could go on there but Daniel was trying to set that aside, let that sit on a shelf and become dusty and Johnny didn't want to push it.

He also could put model on there but Daniel didn't believe him.

Or business owner but Daniel was adamant that the business was Mr. Miyagi's. He was just a silent partner who occasionally did the bookkeeping and filed the paperwork.

Johnny listened about Daniel's classmates and professors and the people he'd met at the event as he ate and it wasn't so bad.

It was nice to hear him at least on the phone.

He'd thought it'd be a lonely night, thought Daniel would take the

night to settle in. But he was pleased Daniel had called.

It made it less lonely.

He finished his dinner and set everything in the sink and was debating heading to the couch which Daniel stopped his retelling of his day with a question.

"What are you wearing?"

Johnny stared down at himself. "Button up and jeans. Why?"

He heard Daniel moving, the creak of a bed.

"What are you wearing Daniel?" Johnny asked.

"A very awful suit. But I'm going to remedy it."

"I thought you liked your suits."

"I do, but I didn't know this was a fancy tie dinner tonight so a classmate lent me a suit jacket and tie and it's too big. It's supposed to be black but it's a dull black."

Johnny heard the sound of fabric as Daniel continued. He could practically hear him fumbling with a tie, loosening it.

"The jacket is bad, and so is the tie, it's a novelty grandfather gift tie. This guy's like only two years older than me but his taste in clothing is...awful."

"But he let you borrow it, so that seems nice."

"It is," Daniel said with a sigh. "But if I'm going to borrow someone's suit that's not my own, which fit me really well. Like in your books right? How they say it fits like a glove or like smooth like butter or something like that, mmm actually-"

"What?"

"I like how you fit like a glove."

Johnny stood rooted in the spot.

"You know what I mean right?"

"Yeah," Johnny managed.

"Anyway if I'm going to borrow a suit I'd rather borrow yours. Yours are nice. But, you know what my favorite suit of yours is?"

Johnny felt like it was a trap. Like Daniel was sitting in some hotel room taking off his borrow suit jacket grinning like a Cheshire's cat.

"The navy one?"

"Mmm that one is good," Daniel hummed. "But no, my favorite is your birthday suit."

Was this that type of call?

It wasn't that late. Had he drunkenly left his classmates and new acquaintances on purpose to make this phone call?

Or was Daniel just...Daniel?

Both.

It was probably both.

He turned looking around the apartment. Front door was locked. Blinds were closed. The stove was off. The oven was off. The rice cooker was off.

He covered the bottom of the phone so Daniel couldn't hear him.

"Good night, be good," he whispered to the bonsai and whale shark plush headed towards the bedroom.

Knowing Daniel this was going to be a long call or...a very short one if he passed out. And knowing Daniel it'd be best if he was safely ensconced behind a second locked door. Just in case.

"I did wear my own pants though. I figured I could get away with nice jeans."

"Are they nice?" Johnny asked.

He didn't think about clothes as much as Daniel did. He had things he liked, but mostly he liked being comfortable. Which for a long time meant going through lots of pairs of jeans until he found ones that could withstand his kicks and he stuck to those.

He shut the door behind him and locked it, feeling bad leaving the bonsai out on the table, but he didn't think he had time to carry them

somewhere else.

Daniel was too far gone. Too focused based off the voice in his ear.

"Mmmhmm, tight. Like you."

Johnny wondered if he should've gotten a drink. Jimmy had brought them some stuff, but Johnny tried not to drink too much.

Daniel was fairly drunk and he was bound to get a lot more weird compliments and innuendos.

Johnny might tease him instead.

"Are you stuck?" Johnny asked, a soft laugh as he sat on the bed. Hearing a frustrated huff in his ear.

"I am not stuck," Daniel said, "This is just a two hand job and I don't want to put down the phone."

"You might have too."

"What are you going to do?"

"Sit here."

"Where's here?"

Johnny wondered if their bedroom sounded different over the phone some how. If Daniel could tell he moved.

"Bed."

"I miss our bed, it's very comfortable. This one's too stiff. Okay don't do anything exciting."

"What could I possibly doing?" Johnny asked innocently.

"With you that's almost anything so just, don't move okay?"

Johnny laughed and listened to Daniel set down the phone. It was weird to listen to him moving, knocking into furniture.

He was pretty sure he had an idea of the pants Daniel had packed. The ones that Daniel really liked. Johnny liked them too. But they were too tight. In the, can't get them off, type of too tight. But Daniel tended to think they were the best pair of pants he had and would

wear them to "events" and nice dinners.

Johnny didn't disagree. But usually Johnny had to help him out of them. Which resulted in a bit of laughing. It was kind of silly, kind of fun, and Daniel would always forget what a pain it was to get out of them and Johnny would find it hilarious. It was always a treat when he wore those.

He could only imagine how a drunk Daniel was trying to get out of them.

Was there a trick to them?

Johnny tried to remember how he usually went about it. Usually Daniel had to lie down and it was nice because it was an excuse to touch him. And Johnny usually went frustratingly slow about it trying not to laugh too much. Until Daniel got frustrated and annoyed all wound up but without any way to deal with it.

Eventually he heard the sound of heavy breathing of the last bit of clothing being kicked off and hitting the floor.

"That sounded exhausting. Should I wish you a good night?"

"Don't even tease about that," Daniel said. "If you hang up I will keep calling you all night."

He did always want a treat after getting that pair of pants off.

Johnny laughed softly "Sorry for teasing. I'm not going anywhere."

"How many buttons are buttoned?" Daniel asked.

"Huh?"

"On your shirt? It's the same one from this morning right? The blue one, with the short sleeves?"

"Uh, yeah," Johnny said.

He was surprised Daniel had remembered. He'd been so frazzled, in packing chaos. He'd given Johnny a good kiss but that was about it. He'd been distracted by making sure he had everything.

"Uh top two are unbuttoned," Johnny said looking down at his shirt.

He didn't know why that mattered. That was still relatively tame. It all

seemed tame. But he had a feeling that wouldn't last long.

Daniel seemed to take this information in. He heard him move it sounded like he was getting comfortable, settling in.

"I like your clothes now. And I know you like them too. But I kind of wish sometimes," Daniel said. "That I'd just ripped off your shirts before. Sent buttons flying. Like you had all this nice clothing you didn't like. I just didn't know you didn't like it. And if I'd known, it would've been so satisfying. You had this silk shirt you wore to graduation. And then you wore it to help build the guest house and to Okinawa and I loved that shirt. Not because it was silk but because you looked good in it. Even a mess. And I wish I could've grabbed the you from then and just ripped that shirt off."

He remembered that shirt?

Johnny wondered if he still had it.

He might.

He hadn't kept a lot of the clothes Sid gave him. But he had some of it.

Johnny wasn't even sure which shirt that had been.

Maybe he'd have to just let Daniel loose on his clothes.

Tell him to pick something and he could do that.

As long as it wasn't...sentimental.

Like the shirt Kumiko had bought him in Okinawa.

Or his red jacket that he'd bought so long ago and Daniel had sewn that bonsai patch on.

Or the sweater Nonnia had made.

"Stuff like that?" Johnny asked. "You just wanted to rip up my clothes?"

"You always looked perfect. I wanted to mess that up. Like you ever see a beautiful cake and just want to shove your hand in it? Or like freshly fallen snow un-touched and you just want to jump in it or walk through it? Or like that satisfying feeling being the first to open a container of peanut butter or butter and being the first to use it?"

Hmmm. Interesting. Maybe he could- this would be embarrassing. Though he assumed it was going that way anyway.

He'd just tip it over.

"You were the first person to fuck me," Johnny said thoughtfully. "Is that similar?"

There was a intake of breath. Like he'd shocked Daniel with that. It was maybe cruder than he'd meant that. It'd actually been wonderfully romantic. And he knew Daniel had been pretty pleased about that. Meteor shower and a picnic and just the two of them.

"I'd rather say made love, but I guess," Daniel cleared his throat. "Nuance aside, yeah. Damn Johnny."

Daniel was quiet for a moment and Johnny wondered if he'd over done it. If Daniel had already been barely holding on and he'd short circuited.

He supposed he might as well say what he'd thought of.

"If you want, I think I might still have that shirt. When you get back I can wear it," Johnny said.

"Hell yes."

“You might have to help me find it though. Which one it is exactly.”

Johnny smiled softly, moving down on the bed to lay down, closing his eyes. If he was careful about it he could pretend. Pretend Daniel was there. Beside him.

"I wish I could've brought you with me," Daniel said softly.

"It'd have been cool to see you in your element."

"I'd rather see you naked in this hotel bed," Daniel said.

Maybe he hadn't short circuited or killed the mood.

"It's unfair that you're so far away and saying things so casually. I don't think you realize what you do to me," Daniel continued.

"Well I know what those tight pants of yours do to me."

"I'm thinking about burning them."

"Don't you dare. You're at least a little tipsy, you could get hurt."

"Then you better keep me distracted."

"With what?"

"Hmm...you could touch yourself and I could listen."

Johnny pushed himself up a little looked around the room, confirming he was by himself.

"What?"

"I'll join you in a bit, but you could get started."

He made it sound easy.

"I mean if I was there I'd help you with it. Or remind you of that first time that you reminded me of. Not that I don't think of it often. Or that look on your face when you started to get into it and were so surprised. The first time you relaxed and opened up. That's a treasured memory."

Johnny felt his face burn. Whatever he was going to say completely died. He was tongue tied.

"Johnny," Daniel said. "You ever think about what you'd tell the old you? If you could go back? Sometimes I think I'd go back and tell you it'd be okay, or like just rescue you earlier. Kumiko made fun of me for that. Told me I wanted to a be a prince or like a hero in a fairy tale. But I also kind of want to go back in time and tell you I'd rock your world. That I knew what you looked like actually relaxed and under me enjoying it. Everything I do to you."

"I-I don't know how I would've handled that," Johnny managed.

"You probably would've turned bright red, might've gotten mad, but man, I love it when you blush, plus I've sparred with you so much now that past you, I think I'd be able to figure out what your moves would be. I think I could take you. In more ways then one."

He'd been so mad back then. So angry and had taken so much anger out on Daniel. That even if Daniel had won Johnny wouldn't have just melted under him, like he did now. It would've been a mess. It might’ve started things earlier. But he thought maybe he'd have not known what to do with compliments, with flirting from Daniel. Blush

bright red for sure, but he still might've lashed out. And if they'd still fought he would've seen red. He didn't trust that he wouldn't have just accepted the flirting. Unless...no. Well. If he hadn't seen Daniel with Ali. Then maybe. Even if past him had only been like 2 years ago.

Now. Focus on the now.

He'd start with buttons.

Unbutton a few because why not?

Why not strip a little?

That's what Daniel had done.

He was out of his suit. Besides it felt weird to still be dressed for the shop but sitting in bed.

"What are you doing?" Daniel asked, pulled out of whatever time travel dirty day dream he was having.

"Unbuttoning my shirt," Johnny said.

"What? Why are you going so fast?"

Johnny paused. "Didn't you want me to start-"

"Yes, but I wanted to pay attention. I stopped paying attention and you, hold on, I'll give you my full attention now."

Johnny could practically hear him pouting, moving to get more comfortable in the bed.

It was kind of weird. It was like a show but not. Was he supposed to be telling Daniel what he was doing? Like narrate?

That seemed weird.

He hadn't ever done this before. But mentioning that seemed silly.

It felt obvious.

He unbuttoned the last of the buttons and shrugged out of his shirt. They had a hamper in the corner of the room.

He balled it up and threw it.

It landed.

He heard Daniel laugh.

"What?"

"Did it go in the basket?"

"Yeah. Was that...bad?"

He hadn't realized it was silly. But he supposed it wasn't...what they were going for.

"No, it was cute. I hadn't thought of what you'd do by yourself. I mean I expected you to eat baloney and stuff like that. A quick meal. Not that you'd cook yourself a nice meal. I mean I'm glad you did. You're always surprising me. It makes me a little homesick you know? I want to eat teriyaki salmon that you've made. I want to sit at our table and watch you cook. Eat your cooking. I want to kiss you."

"I missed our evening kiss," Johnny said softly.

"I'm going to bury you in kisses when I get home," Daniel said. "Your lips, your nose, your ears, behind them, your neck..."

He was just going to list everything.

He'd exhaust himself.

Johnny listened, if he closed his eyes, with how softly Daniel was speaking, the breathy way he was getting he could try and imagine it.

It felt silly but why not?

He laid down again and listened.

It was like a ghost.

He knew what it felt like, better then he thought he had, like without meaning to he'd memorized the feeling of Daniel's lips on him.

Though, maybe that wasn't so strange.

He did think of Daniel's mouth a lot. Of his lips. His voice. His tongue. The warmth of it whenever he settled between his legs with a devious smile. It didn't matter where that mouth was or what it was doing.

Talking was enough to drive him nuts.

There was something wrong with him. He shifted to touch himself.

In the past he used to think about Daniel's hands, the way his wrists had felt in his hands, about his legs. About his smile. The way when they'd fought, which really was unfair because Johnny was rougher, meaner, but the way Daniel's mouth usually opened. How light he was and how easy he was to move.

Maybe he'd spent too much of his time thinking about Daniel before. He'd thought it'd been about Ali. But it wasn't. Not with the amount of focus that shifted to Daniel. He hated thinking about that time now.

But his legs usually still plagued his thoughts. Like those short shorts he thought of too many times, about his cropped shirt on summer days, holding iced green tea, the way he ran his hand through his hair.

It'd all been a guess. What it all felt like.

Other than his hands, his fists, the pressure of his punches and kicks.

He always knew what those hands felt like. The way Daniel's hand started on his knee and just slowly worked his way up, until it was like he didn't care anymore to try and pretend. The way his finger tips felt along his thigh.

He shifted his knees apart. He remembered the way sometimes Daniel liked to start, a kiss here or there, his tongue tasting Johnny like he a popsicle. Possibly the worst thing to watch Daniel eat because he knew. He ate it with a purpose to get under Johnny's skin if they were alone together. Too lewd for public and absolutely dirty at home. A preview of possibilities on hot days.

It'd been pure torture when they'd been at Mr. Miyagi's, living with him and Mr. Miyagi was off doing something else and Daniel would catch his eye and it was game over. Johnny had made himself a promise that one day while they were alone, at home, and Daniel was teasing him he was going to see if Daniel could keep it up, if Johnny treated him the way Daniel treated whatever popsicle he had in his mouth.

He just worried Daniel might choke on it if he moved too fast. But if he delayed then that sticky sweet mouth would be on his and he'd lose focus and Daniel would win. Though Johnny would also win. But

Johnny wanted to return the favor. To not just let himself be taken over by the tide every time Daniel got that look in his eye. As much as he hated Cobra Kai now, he wanted to strike first at the first opportunity.

"You sound amazing,"

Johnny flushed red, moaning as he bucked his hips. It was almost the same. Something Daniel would say when he was there.

His own hand was different though. Even if Johnny pretended. But with that voice in his ear, it almost felt like he was in the room watching him. And he could see that. Daniel enjoying a show for him. Some game where he could watch and listen but not touch. Where it was up to Johnny to start.

If Daniel was there, he'd give him more of a show. Tease him for just watching. Tempt him. There was some lube in the bedside drawer.

He could try. Make it more worth it.

Daniel caught on. Knew that sound too well. The snap of the cap. The breathy way he said Johnny's name sealed it. Johnny wasn't the only one coming undone. It wasn't the same, not even by a long shot. But he had a better idea then the last time he'd tried it. When he'd set it up like a birthday gift. Like he was the gift. Hidden amongst a fancy hotel in Bel Air, dinner and relaxing spa time, Daniel could just slide right in, but that hadn't gone as planned.

Daniel had been so surprised, so shocked that he kept touching him, eyes dark and lust filled. Those big brown eyes that burned when he looked at Johnny like that. More attention then he'd gotten for most of his life. All that attention on him. At a loss of words.

In the moment, he'd worried maybe he'd overdone it, worried maybe it'd been more forward then hot. Because who knew what Daniel wanted? But now he knew what that look actually meant. So turned on that Daniel couldn't act, just kept touching, like he was the most beautiful, hottest thing he'd ever seen.

Johnny didn't know how to handle all that attention.

That sole focus on him. It made his mouth dry, hard to swallow, hard to breathe, and it sent his blood every which way, to his ears, his face, and straight to his dick.

It was embarrassing. But he was trying to relax, trying to enjoy it. To enjoy knowing the effect he had on Daniel. The way his breath was hitching over the phone by his ear when he let out a soft moan because he'd figured it out. Found that spot Daniel always found so easily. The way that made Daniel curse, as he pressed into his own fingers wishing it was Daniel but it was okay because he was there, listening, even hundreds of miles away struggling to keep his own pace.

He was alone. But he wasn't.

It'd never be the same way it once had been.

Daniel was everywhere even when he wasn't there. Johnny could smell him in their bedding. There were all their photos on the wall, Daniel's clothes in the closet next to his, the tea he'd made the way Mr. Miyagi had taught him in a pitcher in the fridge. His books for school, his shoes, his cologne, the after shave and face creams he liked.

Even if Johnny wanted to be alone there wasn't any escape. His finger prints were everywhere on Johnny's skin, burned into his memory, inside of him. His voice was in his head, the taste of him on his tongue. Even if he chased his own pleasure it'd be with Daniel. Even if Daniel hadn't called. Even if they weren't doing this together, even if he was in the shower, he still would've closed his eyes and imagined a ghost of a memory of Daniel. His teeth pinching at his skin, whispering about how hot he was, complimenting him as he fell apart, a mess that Johnny didn't think was attractive but Daniel loved.

It'd be okay, even if Daniel had to go on longer work trips. If something happened that led them apart for those moments, longer then a couple nights. Because Daniel was rooted in his heart.

He pulled the phone closer to him, listening to Daniel's heavy breathing, the soft sounds he was making as Johnny cleaned up.

Did Daniel need encouragement? Maybe he hadn't realized how embedded he was in Johnny's memory, like Johnny hadn't realized.

"The memory of your touch is in my skin, I can still feel you, if I try. Everywhere. Your hands on my thighs, squeezing my chest, or my ass. If I focus I can remember how it feels to have you inside of me."

"Fuck Johnny,"

Everyone always told him to talk more. This probably wasn't what they meant. But-

"I mean I figure that's the plan when you get home. Though, I don't think, even if you're gone for a night, that my body can forget how you feel. And it makes me wonder, if I can't even remember what I wore once upon a time but you can, but I can remember the feeling of your tongue on my skin, then you, who remembers so much, so many small details, probably can do the same thing huh? You can remember my hands, how they feel on you, gripping your shoulders, touching your back, your ass, asking for more. Because you learned how to listen so well. To my quiet requests of more.

“The way I kiss you, like I need it more than air, because sometimes I feel like that. Like I need you more than anything else. To kiss you, to feel you deep inside. So yeah, when you get home, let's do that huh? Because I miss you. Not just listening to you talk or being around me, but maybe when you come home you can fuck me so hard that I can't think or walk straight."

The sound Daniel made was fascinating to hear over the phone. Telling. Very telling. And Johnny grinned.

There was some fun in turning the tables on him. In striking back in a way that left him stunned. It might not be striking first, but it definitely packed a wallop.

"Deal," Daniel said as he caught his breath. "We're going to go until we can't anymore."

That wasn't the challenge he'd issued was it?

"I'll ring you out till there's nothing left,” Daniel promised.

Maybe a bit much. Maybe a bit drunk still. Daniel was trying, in that dazed after way he got some times.

"I can't wait to see you try," Johnny said, challenging tone.

"You won't be smirking when I'm done with you."

"You can tell if I'm smirking over the phone?" Johnny asked with a soft laugh pulling the blankets up towards his chest, curling up on his side, turning the bedside light off.

"I can, you always smirk when you're challenging me to something.

And I refuse to lose."

"How would one lose this? I figure we'd both win."

Maybe it'd been a bad idea, instead of sated and tired like he assumed Daniel would be, how he felt himself, stifling a yawn, Daniel was amped. Ready to go into a ring or like some bad movie you got from the back of the adult section of the local video store.

"You're tired?" Daniel asked, tone soft.

"More like I'm comfortable."

In the dark it did feel like Daniel was there, by his side and he could reach out and touch his warm skin if he wanted, but he knew better than to attempt it, to scare off the illusion.

He hadn't been sure how he'd sleep that night, but if he tried soon. Then maybe, maybe he'd sleep.

"I'm going to call tomorrow," Daniel said quietly.

"I look forward to it. What are you doing tomorrow?"

He heard Daniel laugh softly. Listened to him talk about his plans for the next day. It felt like, just for a moment, those miles weren't there. That they were in the same place again. And with that comfort, even though he didn't mean to, Johnny fell asleep.

Johnny woke up hugging one of their pillows. He sighed when he woke up, the phone on the pillow next to him.

He missed Daniel. He hadn't slept as well without him.

He'd slept better than he feared but not great. What if he got the whale shark and tried to put Daniel's red hoodie on it? Would the smell help?

It wouldn't work. And Daniel would tease him when he got home.

He got up, dressed, tucked the whale shark in when he made the bed, on Daniel's side, and made a bowl of cereal that he ate in front of the TV.

It was Sunday. The shop was closed. He had no plans.

His mother was on a trip, the guys were on campus, busy.

Sure he could go to Mr. Miyagi's and hang out with them and play card games.

He could go check out the dojo. But he wasn't ready yet. He still felt nervous at the thought. That even though he knew Kreese was in jail that he still might be there, hiding in a dark corner ready to jump out.

He had small things he could do. He had books from the library to read, so after his breakfast he read. Finished a book. He checked on the bonsai, moving them to get better light. He saw some dust on one of the shelves and went into their closet they kept full of cleaning supplies and went to work.

He dusted, vacuumed, mopped, cleaned and scrubbed.

He gathered up trash, recycling and took them to their bins.

He read some more.

He exercised.

He had lunch.

He touched something sticky in the fridge so he cleaned the fridge, then the freezer.

He threw out expired frost burnt things.

He did laundry.

He looked at his cleaning supplies, put them back, grabbed his car wash and wax, a bucket of warm water and a soft microfiber cloth and tools and headed out to the garage to wash his car.

He dug around in his car, collecting trash, things he'd forgotten to take inside. He checked the trunk, checked that the food that had been in there hadn't expired and wasn't going to expire soon.

A few boxes of oatmeal were close so he put them in his bag to take in. He checked his tires, popped the hood, looked at the oil level, cleaned off dirt and grime and grease where he found it and once his car was sparkling and waxed, he headed back to the apartment.

He cleaned up and made a shopping list, took the elevator down to the ground floor, said hello to the doorman and headed out.

He wondered what Daniel would want for dinner when he got home. He was due back late Monday afternoon pending traffic. In time for dinner.

Louie was due back from Lucille's on Tuesday.

Daniel had complained about steak the night before. So that was out.

He'd just look around. See what was on sale. What sounded good.

He also needed to decide what he was going to eat for dinner. He'd enjoyed the fish the night before but maybe, he'd just heat up a tamale.

He grabbed a basket and looked around the produce section. He wandered around.

A hand tapped his shoulder and he turned to look at an elderly woman. "Could you get me one of those boxes off the top shelf?"

"Oh sure," Johnny said turning to see where she was pointing and grabbing the box.

She glanced at his basket. So far he'd just grabbed cheese because it was on sale and Daniel liked it.

"Going to a party?"

"Oh, no, trying to think of what to make for dinner tomorrow."

"You know," she said. "Something easy to make is a good pot roast. I make it at least once a week. Do you have a slow cooker?"

"Uh, yeah," Johnny said.

Jimmy had gotten them one. Said it was nice to have one at school. He said he threw it all together in the morning and it was perfect because it was done cooking by the time he was done with classes.

Neither Johnny nor Daniel had tried it yet. Mornings had become hectic with Louie around.

She patted his arm. "Come along, I'll show you what you need. My mom taught me and you know, I adapted it for my slow cooker and my mom and I argued about it for months. But I still think my versions better." She laughed softly and Johnny followed her to the meat counter. "Now you need 3 lbs of chuck roast. That's a good one,

a good price too."

Johnny picked up the one she pointed to.

"My family had pot roast every single Sunday my entire life. I decided when I turned thirty and got married that I was sick of it," She picked out some steak and set it in her basket. "Decided to switch to brisket."

Johnny followed her through to the fresh produce. "Get an onion, yellow one is good. Could you hand me one of those bags?"

Johnny got two bags, one for her and one for himself. She looked around at the fresh produce, picking out some onions. Handing a yellow one to Johnny. He put it in the bag.

"My husband used to cook too. He'd make the most wonderful things. His soups were always amazing. He got me my slow cooker. We ended up having a few of them. He'd get up at five in the morning and make a soup and then go off to work. And while I was home, throughout the day that soup would smell amazing and he'd always leave this little note for me. Telling me to give it a try for lunch, add to it if I thought it needed anything. It was really sweet. Because I'd clean during the day and take care of the kids and I didn't have time to make myself lunch, but he always did. He always got up early and made me lunch, and we'd have it on the side with dinner. You're going to need three big carrots and about 2 pounds of those potatoes. Yup those are the ones."

Johnny got the stuff she recommended carefully putting them in his basket.

"On my worst days, the days where the kids didn't want to go to school or I burnt something or just got frustrated I could go into the kitchen and read his note and have a little soup. And one day, instead of making soup he made a pot roast. And it wasn't quite right. It wasn't like how mom made it. So I kept messing with it throughout the day." She added garlic to her cart and potatoes. "You're going to want about five cloves. Do you know how to mince?"

"Yeah," Johnny said.

Daniel had taught him how.

She nodded. "We made sure all our kids could cook. But they didn't pass that on. My grandkids can't cook. I tried. But they're not there yet. They like to eat out. Or those frozen meals you know? Which is

fine, they like it. But I miss cooking with them. It's nice to see a kid who can cook. Okay, you got salt and pepper at home?"

"Yes."

"Cornstarch?"

"Yes."

"Beef broth?"

"No."

She nodded, grabbing a few more vegetables and some fruit. Johnny followed her. Getting what she said to get, things he knew they didn't have. She smiled at him when they were done, listening to her tell him what he needed to do. How to make the pot roast.

She didn't have measurements. No specific amounts. It was kind of vague but he thought he got it. Essentially clean then chop everything and throw it into the pot, let it cook all day.

He could do that.

He thanked her and she wished him a good day as she left to check out. He then was stuck with what to have for dinner that night. He found himself in the canned section looking at the corned beef and hash that was cheap.

They had eggs and bread at home.

That'd be good enough.

He grabbed the can.

His mom used to make that.

He wondered if she still liked it.

He remembered watching her heat it up in a pan.

He checked out, carried his paper bags home and back to the apartment.

He checked the machine for messages and put everything away, getting out the eggs and bread setting the can on the counter.

It was still too quiet.

He thought about turning on the TV.

He wondered, why the silence bothered him.

Why he didn't like how quiet it was.

He opened the can scooping it into the hot pan, covering it with a lid, waiting for the hash to get a crispy, the way his mother made it.

The mansion was quiet a lot.

If he made a sound while Sid was around he got yelled at. But it wasn't that.

He wasn't scared of Sid, not here, not anymore.

The flash of anger in his mothers eyes and Daniel's whenever his name was mentioned made him pretty sure that if Sid even so much as ever stepped foot out of jail he'd have a rough time keeping the two out of jail themselves. He wouldn't ever show up where Johnny was.

The apartment was safe.

He poked and prodded at the feeling as he toasted the bread, cracked an egg and made space for it amongst the corned beef and hash, watching it cook.

He missed Daniel, missed his constant stream of conversation. Maybe that was a band-aid for something. But for what? Had he forgotten how to be alone? Utterly alone? He shouldn't have, he'd spent most of his childhood alone.

Running.

Maybe running wasn't alone. Maybe it was haunted and the waters were too choppy to be still. Maybe, without the stress and worry because of the people in his life he didn't want or ask for he hadn't had time to contemplate life alone beyond some idyllic peace.

He'd daydreamed about being alone in the woods, in the mountains, just him and no one else. Not being a bother to anyone and no one bothering him.

He thought it'd be perfect.

But now.

Well he knew that he'd miss everyone.

He couldn't do it.

Not for the rest of his life.

But maybe not even for two nights.

Which was concerning. It wasn't like he'd been alone all day. He'd talked to that lady at the grocery store. He'd gotten out of the house. He'd seen Daniel on Friday, he'd seen Mr. Miyagi then. He'd babysat the kids on Thursday. So that wasn't it.

Did he miss his mom?

He'd seen her Friday for lunch.

Was it just him?

Was he uncomfortable with himself?

Did he forget how to entertain himself?

He was an only child who'd been left alone most of his life. That was his default setting. Knowing how to live with himself by himself.

Did he still hate himself?

Was that it?

He didn't like who he was when he was by himself? Because he didn't have a distraction to keep from reminiscing on the terrible things he'd done?

He turned the heat down to low and walked to the bookshelf. He ran his finger along the spines grabbing Frankenstein and walked back to the kitchen staring at it.

The guys had a freshmen course. One where they had to read Frankenstein and think about who they were. There'd been a lot of long phone calls between them with Dutch trying to figure out how Frankenstein tied into the theme.

The guys were so sure it was just tacked on for like a freshmen reading. But Johnny hadn't been so sure. He didn't think they knew

what it was like to feel like a monster. A nameless creature that just wanted to love and made terribly horrific mistakes and bad choices band what it was like for the people he loved, the people who had created him not want him.

Johnny had understood that.

How can you know yourself if you're just trying to survive?

How can you look beyond the parts other people gave you that aren't your own?

How do you decide what is you?

But he didn't say it. Because the topic would've changed to trying to tell Johnny he wasn't a monster. And maybe Johnny knew on some level that he wasn't a monster, but he knew how it felt like to believe you are one.

He sympathized with the monster.

He had the syllabus somewhere.

A copy that the guys had made and given to him over one of his lunches with them on campus after they'd moved in. Making sure they'd settled in okay.

He dug around for it in the desk. They'd printed it on a highlighter orange piece of paper that clubs used to get people's attention but really was just hard to read and Johnny studied it.

They'd been supposed to write an essay about who they were, who they had been and who they wanted to be.

That was something.

Everyone had asked him what he wanted to do, not who he wanted to be. And maybe if he tackled the future from a different angle he might dislodge something.

He grabbed paper, a notebook and pen and set them with the book on the table. He checked his food, crispy like he liked and the eggs were done.

He turned off the stove and filled up a plate, grabbing toast and butter and sat down.

Breakfast for dinner. He liked that.

It was easy.

One can, two eggs, and two pieces of bread.

He looked at the piece of paper. Who had he been? Did he start all the way at the beginning? Only son to a single mother? Homeless? Bullied? They were facts. Stepson to a man who didn't want him? Also fact.

Bookworm at a library because it was free and a form of escape? Because they had snack time and free food? Adults around that scared off bullies?

He had always on the look out for free food, things he could take to share with his mom. He didn't know how many times he'd been given a cookie from the librarians and then mustering up the courage to ask if he could have a second and then given it to his mother when she'd come to pick him up. How sometimes he couldn't bring himself to ask so he split it in half saving it in his jacket pocket to share when she arrived.

He had been a karate student, a champion.

He'd been the best in his class.

He'd been award winning...which now, after working at the animal sanctuary felt like he was a prized cow that some kid had raised for a 4H club.

It was a sour taste. All that hard work. All that time of his life spent training. Only to become a bully himself.

He'd been a model. He'd studied a lot of different things. He'd been a boyfriend. He'd nearly asked someone to marry him. He'd traveled. He'd left LA. He was a friend. He was still a son of a single mother. He was still a boyfriend. Just to someone he couldn't marry.

Did he want to be a husband?

He did.

He really did.

Okay. He could write that down in a corner of his sheet of paper.

He had spent his childhood at a flower shop and now he worked at a bonsai shop. He was still a student, of sorts.

He babysat, though the family was talking about moving. They'd leave soon. More people leaving.

It was getting quieter.

Lonelier.

Everyone was living out their dreams.

Or attempting it. Taking a shot at the their futures. The futures they wanted.

Dutch, Bobby, Tommy, Jimmy and Daniel.

Heck Mr. Miyagi was chasing his own dream.

And Johnny...Johnny was just existing.

He was fine with that. But he did feel left behind.

Chozen was opening a dojo, had moved to the USA, was working with the government with his uncle, Kumiko was dancing.

Everyone was doing something except for him.

Not exactly accurate he supposed.

He was babysitting but not for much longer.

He was working at the animal shelter when they needed it but apparently one of the veterinarian schools had started a program with them and they hadn't needed him in a long time.

He worked in the bonsai shop with Mr. Miyagi.

It wasn't a bad job, he liked seeing Mr. Miyagi almost every day.

He liked the smell of potting soil and plants.

He went down to UCLA for lunch at least once a week, talked on the phone with the guys, Jessica, and Kumiko frequently enough to make him worry about their phone bill. He drove Louie around. He had dinner, lunches, brunch, breakfast with his mom.

What did he want? Where did he see himself in five years? Ten?

He still saw himself in LA.

Daniel was going to be going to school for a couple years, who knew how long he'd be stuck at the apprenticeship.

Who knew where he'd go from there. But Johnny didn't want to go far from him. He wanted to stick together.

He wanted....

a home, a house, a garden, a nice kitchen, a bath tub, good lighting for their bonsai. He wanted space to have guests.

Louie was sleeping on the couch.

He wanted to go to the beach.

He wanted to swim.

He wanted a pool?

Maybe.

He wanted a big tree that gave them shade. He wanted space for his books. He had space for his books. But he wanted to buy books. He wanted a place for those books.

He wanted space to work out, to exercise, to spar and practice kata. He wanted a bigger table and a space that fit that table.

He wanted a wedding.

He scratched that one out with a sigh eating his corned beef and hash and egg.

Maybe he should write what he liked.

Kids were okay. He could work with them. But he didn't want to be a teacher or something. Not like at an actual school.

He didn't think he'd like it.

He wouldn't be able to handle kids getting bullied and being told he couldn't outright do anything. He'd get mad and make a scene. Probably get into a fight.

Daniel would have to come get him and he'd have to explain why he fought some kid or teens or heck their parents.

He liked working with animals but the amount of schooling the owner complained about sounded exhausting. Johnny knew himself. Becoming a doctor even for animals wasn't something he wanted to do.

He liked nature. He liked books. He could talk to the librarians and see what it took to be a librarian.

He could see what was needed to become a park ranger. Work outside. Might be fun.

He didn't know. He supposed, like Jimmy, he'd try on different hats and see what he liked. Maybe he'd find something new. Maybe he'd like a different job. Like accounting.

Accounting?

No way.

An office job sounded like hell.

But he'd think of something. Maybe he could be a professional lifeguard. He liked being on the beach. Was that a job?

Coast Guard?

Ugh.

He closed the notebook and ate more with a frown.

Why was it so hard? How come everyone else had their lives together, knew what they wanted to do? Why didn't he just automatically know?

What was missing?

The phone rang and he got up to get it. "Hello?"

"Johnny, what's wrong?" Daniel's voice came through, concerned.

"Nothing, I was just trying something and it didn't work. It's fine," he said pushing the book and notebook aside and sitting back down to finish his meal. "How's the rest of the conference?"

He didn't sound drunk this time. But there was noise in the background. He wasn't in his room.

"Where are you?" Johnny asked taking a bite of his toast, putting a bit of egg and corned beef and hash on it.

"At the hotel bar. I've been given a pina colada and some snacks that someone brought in."

"Shouldn't you be socializing?"

"I am, but I'm tired," Daniel complained.

Johnny could practically picture him pouting, sitting at the bar with the phone playing with the straw of his drink.

"Why are you tired? Did I keep you up too late?"

"No, my classmates banged on my door at 5am because they wanted to go to some greasy dive for breakfast before the seminars we wanted to go to. I tried to tell them I'd prefer to sleep and have the hotel breakfast but they offered to pay and I couldn't say no. What did you do today?"

"Cleaned the apartment, worked out a little, cleaned the Avanti and went grocery shopping. I'm boring."

"Johnny, you should be enjoying having the place to yourself. I'd be curled up on the couch watching TV all day until my brain just turned to static and I was all stiff from not moving."

"I figured I might as well later. I got a lot done today," Johnny said.

"Have you eaten?"

"Eating now."

"What are you having?"

"Corned beef and hash, eggs and toast."

"We ate that a lot growing up," Daniel said.

"Yeah? My mom used to make it too. Saw it at the store and thought why not?"

"Like you remember?"

"A bit. Looks like I'll have leftovers so I guess I'm having it for breakfast too."

Daniel laughed softly. "I can't wait to be home."

"Yeah?"

"I miss you."

"I miss you too. I think you should go spend time with your classmates though, meet industry people or whatever you're supposed to be doing. Eat something."

Daniel sighed. A big, heavy sigh. "I wish you were here."

"It'd be kind of weird right?"

"No, I think it'd be nice. I miss sleeping next to you."

"You probably don't want to start that up again while you're at the bar," Johnny said.

"I mean I can't, but you can."

"I'm still eating, sorry."

Daniel sighed. "Not even a little?"

"Not really sexy food,"

"What is sexy food?"

"Dunno but this isn't it."

"Sushi?"

"Sushi is your go to? It's raw fish, how's that sexy?"

"Bite sized?"

"So what Vienna sausages are sexy?"

Daniel laughed and Johnny smiled, it was such a nice sound.

"I mean they are what they are."

"Yeah, I don't think anyone on the planet is going to agree with you on that one."

"Wine's sexy?"

"Is it or do you just like the feeling after a glass?"

"Hmm that's it. Bananas?"

"Are you just picking things that are phallic shaped?"

"Mmm...maybe. Whipped cream."

"I can see that one," Johnny said remembering Daniel eating whipped cream off his finger at the lodge.

"Yeah?"

"I'll give you that one."

"Hmmm so condiments? Like chocolate syrup? Honey?"

"You can't just say condiments, someone might say ketchup or Worcestershire sauce."

"Ugh."

"Vinegar, hot sauce, soy sauce, sauerkraut,"

"Okay okay I got your point. Desert condiments."

"Sprinkles?"

"Hmm. Yeah they were kind of hot on White Day. I think we got to go with sweets. A banana split."

"So that's what, ice cream, bananas, whipped cream, cherries-"

"Cherries are a yes."

"So all fruit?"

"Gotta be."

"Sexy grapefruit? Pomegranate?"

"I mean isn't that the whole thing with Hades and Persephone?"

"Kiwi?"

Daniel laughed warmly in his ear.

"Sexy kiwi. Daniel that's what you've said. You've gone with vienna sausages, kiwi, and sauerkraut."

"I did not. I took some of those back."

"You sure? You really sure?"

"Peaches."

"Pears? Are apples sexy?"

"The caramel from caramel apples?"

"Don't those just harden till you can't easily bite into them?"

"True. But they sell that dip. That's kinda sexy."

"So what fondue?"

"Yes!"

"Cheese is sexy?"

"Maybe," Daniel said thoughtfully.

"You're going to have to make a list and give a presentation on it, start a debate next time we go down to UCLA or the guys are over."

"Ohhh that does sound like a fun debate. What do you think of blueberries?"

"Maybe. Berries and cream are good."

"Now I just wanted desert. I'm not going to want dinner."

"You tend to like to skip straight to the good stuff."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" Daniel asked suspiciously.

"Neither good or bad?"

"You sure, I've heard a ton of complaints this trip about peoples lovers being bad at foreplay."

"You’re great."

"Am I?"

"Do you want me to reassure you now?"

"Yes."

"How'd we get from me having dinner to this?"

"I don't know, I've just been thinking about it. Like how do you know if you're any good at anything? Like I may think I'm good at certain things, but how do I actually know? Like okay, I think I'm good at cooking but am I? Am I really?"

"You are good at cooking," Johnny said.

"Now you're saying that but you love me so-"

"Daniel, cooking is in your blood. What would your mother say if she heard you saying you weren't good at it? Or hell Louie?"

Daniel sighed. "Okay, so you can tell you're good at cooking. I know I'm good at cooking. I can tell because people can't always fake that they like food. And no one's told me my food was bad. But sex is a different matter."

"Haven't we had this conversation? Didn't I already tell you that I don't fake anything?"

"Well yeah, I know that, and like you said yesterday I remember and I know from your face and how you respond that you enjoy it."

"I can't believe you're sitting at a bar and this is the conversation you want to have over the phone," Johnny said.

"Okay, well listen you hang out with enough people and they tell you all these horror stories. Like they're just a few drinks in and I know more about their sex lives then I want to. And the foreplay is like the biggest complaint. That and I guess finishing early and passing out before returning the favor. But, like how do you know if you're doing enough? Or if you're doing it right? I was reading this magazine because like someone brought it with them and it's been passed around while we were waiting for stuff to start and I swear. Absolutely swear that 90% of the magazine is sex tips. And like I flipped through it and we're not doing like half of it."

"You do realize that some of those magazines are bullshit right?"

"But-"

"The guys and I read those when we were younger and one of them recommends playing tennis with your partners balls. Do you want me to try that? Is that what you're saying?"

"Oh god no. What the hell?"

"People like to gossip. And everyone is different. No two relationships are the same. Right? Like your relationship with Ali was vastly different from mine right?"

"I...honestly don't know. You almost never talk about it," Daniel said quietly.

Johnny sighed. "I shouldn't have brought her up. The point was that my relationship with her is different then my relationship with you. And that's a good thing. I think we have a great relationship. A wonderful one."

"Are we having enough sex? That was another complaint. Long term couples said they just stopped, they got bored."

"There is a red jar filled to the brim with little notes of things you want to do. There's no way we're getting bored."

"We're not?"

Johnny sighed putting the last bit of toast down. "I don't know whose bothering you and making you doubt yourself but I'm happy. Stop reading that magazine and pass it on to the next person or dump it in the trash."

"I miss you. It's just nice to hear your voice. I wish you were here with me. Even though you wouldn't like it. It'd probably be super boring and you might feel out of place, but having you beside me is reassuring and I miss sleeping next to you. I think I only slept last night because I passed out from booze."

"Not the phone sex?"

"That helped. And you're right my memory is good. Especially if I can hear you. Like right now I'm closing my eyes and I'm pretending you're sitting next to me because that, ghostly memory feeling feels better. Better than the reality that you're miles miles and miles away."

"And you'll see me tomorrow."

"I will and I feel lucky. So many people here are happy and I just...I'm not the same."

"You're not happy? What's wrong? Has someone done something?" Johnny asked.

It'd take a couple hours but if he left now he could be there maybe before Daniel went to bed.

"They're happy because they're not at home. They view this as a party, an excuse, to avoid responsibilities they don't want to have. They don't want to see their kids, they don't want see their wives or husbands. They don't want to see their loved ones, the people they picked, and they joke about it. And then they turn to me and I'm silent because I don't feel the same. I said that. I said that I'm quite happy at home. Someone laughed and asked well how long has it been and I said we met in high school, started dating over the summer, and they said ah, that's just the honeymoon period. Is it? I don't want there to just be a period of happiness. I want it to flood the rest of our lives. I don't want to be like them. I don't want to come here to talk about how much I hate being home. I love being home with you.

“They look at me like I'm young and it's a joke but, I think it's all so incredibly sad. They drink, I drink. We all drink and they complain about the most mundane things. So and so's husband clips his nails somewhere she hates and so and so's husband is always gone playing golf with his friends. Lives are meant to be lived, and love is meant to be loved. Why say you love someone if you don't? I can't relate. I feel so out of place.

“I want to learn you know? I want to learn about best practices and things to expect and the stories people have to tell. But not these. I don't want to laugh because people have gotten comfortable, have swallowed all the conversations they need to have. And I miss you. I miss you terribly. Because it's like a seed. Like one of those seeds you didn't plant. You didn't want it and it's there. A little seed of doubt, of worry. And I didn't have it when I got here. I mean I had plenty, but not that one."

"Daniel, breathe," Johnny said softly. "Like the way Mr. Miyagi taught you. Yeah let me hear it."

Johnny listened to him breathing audibly over the phone. "Yeah, just like that."

He moved to the couch, taking the phone with him, curling up with

the soft blanket they kept on the back of the couch. "What are you supposed to do tonight? What haven't you done yet?"

"We're supposed to go to dinner."

"Do you want to go? Should you go?"

"Yeah, it's the last night."

"So go. Ask the bartender for some water. Make sure you eat something that sounds good, order something you want even if it's different. Don't just get something because everyone else is. Because it's better that you have a good time rather than you make yourself miserable following their footsteps. You hated the steak yesterday so look over the menu and pick something you think you'll like. If you don't know ask the waiter what they recommend. Get yourself dessert if you want it. Who cares? Get water with dinner. Or a soda. Skip the alcohol. Eat dinner, chat about the convention, about the things you learned.

"Ask what they went to and what they liked the best. Best speaker, best bit of work related advice. It'll be a nice change of pace. And it'll be good to remember and to compare notes. Then after dinner go back to the hotel, to your room. Shower, or at least wash your face and brush your teeth. Then call me. Okay? I love you. I'm happy. I..."

Johnny felt his skin burn, his heart was pounding. He had to say something right? They weren't going to have that conversation, not the same as the night before, but Daniel needed to hear something.

"-meant everything I said yesterday. It's true. It's not heat of the moment stuff. The only thing that didn't make yesterday better, the only thing missing was you. You. Your touch, your mouth, your body on mine. I remember how all that feels and it helps, but having you home doing those things...it's better, preferred. And I'm sorry that your..." He carefully cleared his throat, pulling the blanket around himself. "-that your classmates and the people you're with are so sour about their own lives but you are amazing, and I don't think...no, I know," He pulled the blanket up over his face. "That I've never orgasmed so much in my life and I doubt I would without you. Not the same anyway. And I am looking forward to you coming home and showing you how much I missed you."

"I...I am going to call you as soon as I'm done eating," Daniel promised voice in a tone Johnny knew too well.

"Don't rush your dinner. I'm not going anywhere. I'll just be here," Johnny said gripped with the sudden fear that Daniel would try and scarf down his food and choke or hurt himself.

"Yeah, waiting for me. I hate to leave you waiting. That's a Miyagi warning I remember him repeating often. Don't leave the person you love waiting. Okay I'm going to try and get everyone moving. The sooner we get to dinner the sooner I can eat and then call you."

"Love you."

"I love you too. Talk to you soon."

Johnny rolled onto his side.

He turned on the TV, flipped through the channels watching a bit of one show then another.

He read for a bit.

He carried the phone into the bathroom and got ready for bed, taking a shower and trying to listen very carefully in case Daniel called.

He hoped Daniel was enjoying his dinner, hoped that he'd calmed down. Hoped that he was having fun.

He turned off the shower and dried off. He headed to the bed crawling in and opening his book. He read a couple chapters before the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"I'm so sorry. The restaurant took forever," Daniel was breathing hard.

"Did you run?" Johnny asked.

"I did. Straight from the car and up the stairs to my room because the elevator was taking too long."

"There was no need to do that."

"But it's getting late you were about to go to bed."

"No," Johnny said.

He wasn't going to go to bed, he was in bed. He was going to stay up and keep reading until his eyes burned.

Daniel laughed softly.

"What?" Johnny asked.

"Sometimes you're more of a morning person. You start getting sleepy around this time."

"I do not."

"You do," Daniel said with a soft laugh. "What have you been doing? Reading? Is it a good book?"

"It's getting good."

The words were getting blurry though. Maybe Daniel was right.

How'd he skip being young?

How'd he move straight to being an old man because it was only...it was early.

He put his bookmark in the book and set it on the bedside table.

"Weren't you going to brush your teeth or something?"

"I'll do that after."

"What'd you have for dinner?"

"Spaghetti."

"Really? How'd they do?"

"It's really hard to fuck up spaghetti, not impossible but hard. It was decent, a hell of a lot better than that steak. It came with garlic bread which was like that Texas toast garlic bread? The stuff that's thick and huge? That was good."

"Dessert?"

"Oh yeah I got one of those lava cakes with ice cream. I swear everyone got super jealous because they just got more booze. And it was like the same damn price. The lava cake was much better. And unlike those guys I'm not going to have to worry about driving home with a hangover now."

He sounded proud, pleased, preening.

Johnny smiled softly. "Yeah, that's definitely no fun."

"I can leave early and be home before lunch because I'm going to bed at a decent time."

"Is this a decent time?"

"See! You're totally sleepy. You wore yourself out cleaning and doing errands and being responsible. You don't have to you know. Like we share that stuff and since Louie is crashing on the couch uninvited he should be pitching in too. You shouldn't take your freedom from LaRusso's as a time to deep clean. You should enjoy the quiet."

"I learned I'm not the biggest fan of the quiet."

"No?"

"I miss hearing you talk."

"Yeah? I can talk your ear off as soon as I get home."

"Can't wait."

"Me either. Did you watch any TV today?"

"Just a little. Mostly read this evening."

"How many library books do you have left?"

"Library called I've got another five on hold waiting for me, so I've got to rush through them."

"I swear the libraries call almost as much as Ma," Daniel said with a laugh. "How do you pick all these books."

"Oh they recommend them. Or I read the reviews in the paper."

"You know I think most people our age are still reading the comics and just checking the movie showings and times or sports. But you're actually reading book reviews," Daniel said in a such a soft loving tone.

"Was dinner better?"

"It was."

"And what was your favorite part of the convention?"

"They had a cool keynote speaker who talked about like all the stuff we're learning about in school but from the perspective of someone whose been implementing those practices for like decades and about how times have changed and all the good changes she's seen and it was cool. Oh and there was this small business, like mom and pop shop thing and I ended up talking to some people about Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees and it was kind of nice to put everything into perspective from that point of view."

"Do you miss it?"

"The shop? Yeah. I miss you. I miss working with you throughout the day. I miss kissing you when we didn't have customers. I miss the way you look when you're focused on a bonsai. I miss listening to you and Mr. Miyagi talk. I miss watching you lift heavy things like they're nothing. I miss having coffee with you. I miss having lunch together and Dutch coming in to hang out with us. I miss when Mr. Miyagi would go into the back and I'd running my hands along your back or grabbing your ass or just touching you in general. I miss driving together to work and I miss driving home together. I miss spending time with Mr. Miyagi."

"You should go fishing with him."

"I'm not a fan."

"He doesn't dump you in the water when you actually go fishing."

"I know that. I just, I feel like I talk too much. Like we went fishing one time and there were other people around and they said 'Kiddo you gotta shut up you're going to scare off all the fish' and I was stunned. Was I talking too much? Was I scaring off Mr. Miyagi's fish? I didn't know but I felt awful. I was worried about it. And I felt bad. I think of it as a boring thing to do but at least I got to talk with Mr. Miyagi but then I realized oh maybe I'm wasting both our time."

"We talk when we fish," Johnny said.

"But I doubt you'd ever scare off fish. I...I talk a lot. I don't want to ruin Mr. Miyagi's fishing trips."

"You're like a son to him, fishing and Miyagi's are like a father son thing, you should do it again. I know it'd make him happy. He misses you."

Daniel sighed. "I miss him too. I mean I know we see him at least

every other week for dinner, but it's not the same right? Not the same as living with him. But his house is full and I much prefer having our own space."

"Yeah, I get that."

"I mean I don't want you to be silent, and we'd have to be at Mr. Miyagi's. You were very very quiet at Tristen and Moshe's." Daniel said. "And that worried me. Like that I'd fucked up, you know with that challenge."

"Huh?"

"You...you spent your whole life trying to be unseen and unheard. I want to hear you. I didn't like that."

"But we've been quiet since Louie's been here."

"But not silent. There's a different. You're not as loud, but you're still there. You're not holding back. I think that's it. I don't want you to hold back. If you don't like something then that's fine. Say so. If you're uncomfortable say so. If you're enjoying it, please let me hear it."

Johnny blushed.

"I like listening to you. I know I talk a lot so it may seem like I'm not listening. But I am. Every little sound you make. I hoard those like a dragon hoards treasure."

"That's the weirdest dragon hoard."

"Hey, some people treasure gold and silk and fine things. I treasure you. You're worth more to me. Just as you are. Wouldn't trade you for a thing."

Johnny didn't know how to respond to that, didn't know what to say. He knew that if Daniel was there he'd just kiss him.

Maybe he should say that? Maybe that was the type of speaking up he meant? Probably not but worth a try.

"I'd kiss you if you were here."

"I'm looking forward to that."

"To kisses? Just kisses?"

"Not just kisses. I'm looking forward to everything. The comfort of our couch. Our nice towels. Our nice bed. You in our nice bed, on our couch. You anywhere in our home really. I want to come home and I want to just be one."

"One?"

"With you. It's been too long."

"Two days?"

"I get by when we can't do it by having you close. By kissing you, by touching you, cuddling and talking. But it's so much worse when you're not nearby to touch or talk to. By not having you close it's like a million times worse."

"A million times. How are you surviving?"

"Subsisting fully on daydreaming up what I'm going to do when I get home. Though I will say I woke up this morning and took a shower and thought more about what you might be doing throughout the day."

"You gave me a fictional day?"

"Daydreamed. You know how people do."

"Uh huh, sure, so what did daydream me do today?"

"Well it's not fun since I know what you actually did today and now I feel bad."

"You feel bad? Why?"

"Well you cleaned and you did errands. But um… you just sort of touched yourself and moaned my name a whole bunch."

"I mean I did that last night right?"

"Yeah. But like I imagined you spread out on the couch doing that."

"Louie sleeps there now. I'm not going to-"

"Listen Louie is not any part of my daydreams."

"These aren't daydreams Daniel. They're sexual fantasies."

"Whatever you want to call them, the point is it was hot."

"I thought you said you felt bad."

"Only a little. Did you do that today?"

"No."

"Could you?"

"Do what?"

"That?"

"You want me to touch myself and moan your name?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not moving."

"Where are you?"

"In bed."

"That's fine. I like you in our bed. Preferably naked. Are you naked?"

"No."

"Why not? You've got the whole place to yourself. You could just have spent the entire weekend nude. Could've worked out naked, ohh I kind of want to watch that. Let me sit on your back while you're naked and doing push ups. Clean in the nude. You can cook wearing nothing but an apron. You know in case there's hot oil or something. I like that."

"I'm not going to spend the whole weekend naked. That kid still gets locked out and comes over from time to time."

"It's been months since that kid's gotten locked out. I think they put the key on a necklace or something."

"Still I'm not scaring a kid or having to run to my room to get dressed."

"The apron at least?"

"Maybe, sometime."

"I'll take it."

"Is that what you'd do? If you were home alone?"

"What?"

"Just be naked?"

"Hmm maybe part of the time. It's not as fun if you're not there."

"How do you know?"

"I tried it one of the mornings that I had the place to myself. We'd had sex in the morning and then you got up and got dressed and went to the shop and I just put off getting dressed and it was fine but like it's not as fun if you're not there to be naked with. At least for me."

"Huh."

"Huh? Why huh?"

"I thought you'd like that."

"I mean it's fine, it's nicer because it was cooler and I didn't have to turn on the AC like I usually do but I realized part of the fun of being naked is that I can just touch you and you're usually naked and I guess I don't like being fully exposed? I like only being naked if I'm with you."

"So you don't want to sit on the couch naked together."

"Will you be in my lap?"

"No."

"Will we be cuddling?"

"For this experiment no. Just chilling naked next to each other."

"I guess not. I like it when I'm touching you. Even if it's just naked cuddles. Weird."

"Weird?"

"Well Louie asked if one of the joys of having our own apartment was just being naked all the time and I said we couldn't be because the guys had keys and came over but that was like during school breaks and when everyone was in town. But I like seeing you naked. Doesn't matter what you're doing. But I need to be touching you. Like naked

with you in bed, easy. Love that. Even if we're not having sex. But I don't want to wander around the apartment completely nude by myself."

"I feel like a lot of people that's their go to."

"Yeah. That's why it's weird. I thought it was mine too."

"I mean I wouldn't mind."

"You wouldn't?"

"I like looking at you too. Like when you decide you're not wearing anything to bed I like that. I like looking."

"You do?"

"Yeah. I like seeing you naked."

"Hmm I'm going to have to think about that one then."

"What changed?"

"Well I guess if you're looking it's more...pointed? Then it's kind of hot? It's weird. I want you to look. Like at the library. I hadn't realized you'd been looking at me that way until we went to the library at Newark."

"You...seriously?" Johnny asked.

He felt like he was always looking. Or trying very very hard not to look.

"Well I'm usually so busy looking at you-"

"You nearly killed me when I first started coming over to Mr. Miyagi's to help out and you wore those tiny shorts and would hand me glasses of iced tea."

"I did?" Daniel asked with a laugh.

"Yes. I thought it was practicality obscene! You weren't wearing that to school. But for some reason at Mr. Miyagi's you were wearing less. My heart nearly stopped. You ducked down to like play with my pants and I panicked. Nearly died on the spot."

"Oh! I remember that. I thought it was weird you were wearing pants

when it was so hot out. But that was after I scratched you right?"

"Yeah and Bobby wouldn't stop teasing me about it. Because he knew I liked you so he was trying to figure out if we'd done anything and I couldn't explain that you just accidentally scratched me because I was making you mad and we were all crammed into Mr. Miyagi's truck. He didn't believe me."

"I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to scratch up your lovely thigh. I would've kissed it. When I get home I'm kissing your thighs. To make up for it. It didn't scar, but I'm still so sorry."

"Well I scratched up your back so I think we've both-“

"You scratched me up during sex, it's not the same. I scratched you when I was mad and sure that was an accident but I didn't mind you scratching my back because you were holding onto me for dear life."

"Yeah, dear life is accurate. I thought we were going to die."

"We didn't, but again, I knew for days, just by like twisting and looking in the mirror that I'd fucked you real well because you'd scratched me up so much. I was kind of proud of that."

"I'm just grateful none of it got scarred or like infected or anything. Could you imagine going swimming and your mom asking what happened? I'd die."

"I'm sorry but I'd wear it like a badge of honor."

"Not to your mom."

"I don't know what I'd say. I think I'd accidentally give myself away, she'd like ask Honey what happened? And I'd say nothing but I'd probably like glance at you or something and I think she wouldn't ask anything else but she'd know. Because she reads me too easily."

"Ugh."

Daniel laughed softly. "But that does remind me, we should go swimming soon. When was the last time we made it out to the beach?"

"It's been a while....we'll have to take Louie."

"Yeah. He'll like that....are you naked yet?"

"No. We've been talking about family. I'm not going to strip during

that."

"Fine. No more family."

"I'm setting the phone down."

Johnny set the phone down taking off his pajamas and then getting back into bed. He wondered if he'd care if he hadn't spent so long always being dressed in case he needed to run. If it wouldn't feel so weird to be so exposed even in bed if that wasn't ingrained.

Maybe eventually he'd stop caring.

"So, how's it feel?"

"Weird."

"Weird?"

"I'm dressed usually so I can get out of bed and move faster."

"Like if you've got to run?" Daniel asked softly.

"Yeah," Johnny said. "This...slows that down."

"You don't need to run anywhere right?"

"Right?"

"You can just spread out in bed and enjoy it."

"Hmm."

"Try it."

"I am," Johnny said. He wasn't relaxed, but the point wasn't the nudity. Daniel wanted to talk. Wanted him to touch himself again. And that was different. "I think we're going to have to talk more."

"Not a problem," Daniel said.

He talked about the convention. About the things he'd done that day. He told him about the pressure of the water at the hotel being abysmal, almost like the pressure in their apartment before Johnny fixed it. He talked about his classmates and how once they started talking about the conference it was better, he'd learned about the stuff he missed and had a better time.

Johnny yawned, tried to stifle it. It wasn't boring but he was tired.

"You're not gonna huh?"

"Hmm?"

He wondered if he'd fallen asleep.

"When I get home do you want to do take out?"

"I already got dinner planned," Johnny said.

"You do huh?"

"I mean if it's bad we can do take out."

"I'm looking forward to seeing what you make."

"When are you getting in?"

"Hopefully before lunch."

"I'll see you then."

"Yeah. I love you."

"Love you too."

"Good night Johnny, sleep well."

"You too."

He heard the soft click and he carefully set the phone next to the whale shark and curled up, unable to keep his eyes open.

In the morning Johnny woke up and stretched, he got dressed, taking a little longer to pick something out. He didn't always care but he realized he'd fallen asleep on Daniel the night before and wanted to make an effort.

He heated up his leftovers and went to work making the pot roast in the slow cooker, chopping up vegetables and dumping everything in, covering it and turning to look around the apartment.

He had a couple of hours left.

What was missing to welcome Daniel home?

Flowers. Flowers would be nice.

He double checked the clock. He could make it to the market and have plenty of time to spare.

He grabbed his wallet and the car keys. It'd been a while. When was the last time he'd gone?

When he lived with Sid, Sid had florists he was supposed to use. He used them for Ali's bouquets, for flowers for his mom for mothers day. It was one of the few things Sid didn't care that Johnny bought because it was always for Ali or his mother and it made his mom happy.

Johnny had liked going to the florists, but it was also tainted because they knew Sid. Because he knew every purchase and choice went back to Sid. So the florist he knew best he couldn't bring himself to go to.

The market though was different. He hadn't bought anything from the market. He always wanted to. Usually he just walked around, enjoying the hustle and bustle, seeing the flowers loaded off the trucks in the early morning and looking at the displays. Flowers he'd never seen before shipped in from far off lands he never dreamed he'd get to see.

The first time he'd stepped foot in the market he'd been little. It'd been early. Way too early in the morning. The sky still black and the air cool. The elderly couple who'd owned the florist shop had held his hands. His mom had something that morning and he remembered her dropping him off early with them. He remembered rubbing sleep from his eyes and them saying, "Oh it's no problem Laura, he can come with us to the market."

He had thought they were going grocery shopping. Sometimes there were sales if you showed up early and he and his mom did that. Or if you waited till right before they closed and they had to get rid of stuff. That was how they got their bread. Waiting for those closing sales. But instead he'd ridden in the back of the van and then found himself in another world. A busy bustling world of flowers. More than he'd ever seen in his life and the people he was with were on a mission.

He remembered the woman telling him important things about the market. How the market worked, the best ones to get, all her secrets to being there.

He was pretty sure as he stepped into the market walking through the aisles, hands stuffed in his red leather jacket that there was a chance that he couldn't buy what he wanted. That he'd go overboard if he wasn’t careful accidentally drown Daniel in flowers. But it was so familiar. He'd gone when he was bored in high school. When he woke up too early and needed to do something, to get out of the house and the beach was crowded or the library just didn’t feel right. When he wanted to be somewhere loud and to get lost in a crowd. He'd just show up and walk around. He knew the people there. Even though they probably didn't know him. It was his favorite busy haunt. He liked disappearing amongst them. Lost in the hustle and bustle.

He walked for a while, taking stock of what was there, what was in season, surprised at what he remembered, what he recognized. Things that were grown nearby, the flowers shipped in from overseas, names for things he'd thought he'd forgotten bubbling to the surface of his mind. The meanings they held. It was like being amongst old friends.

He looked at his watch.

He'd wasted so much time just walking without a purpose, lost in nostalgia. He had to hurry. He walked to a few sellers, bought a couple things here and there and hurried home.

He put the flowers in water, set them out on the table and curled up on the couch with his book to wait and read.

Johnny heard the key in the lock, heard the bolt move and the door open. He listened to shoes being removed, a coat being hung up and a bag being slung into a corner as some keys were dropped in the tray. The door shut, was locked, and socked feet padded towards him.

He was almost done with his page.

Very close.

Just one more paragraph.

The footsteps paused. Stilled.

Only a few more lines.

He'd be there soon.

The couch sunk as a hand pressed into it, as knees found careful places to hold weight, weight that was sighed out in an almost content

sigh as a body lay on top of his and a head on his chest as Johnny lifted his book just a little higher, following the page, those last few words to the end of the sentence, to the period and he flipped the page, reaching around blindly for his bookmark and shoved the bookmark into the book before setting it aside on the coffee table and looking down at the brunette laying on top of him, legs tangled with his and arms gently wrapped around his torso.

"Welcome home Daniel," Johnny said gently running his fingers through the dark hair. "Did you have fun?"

"No," came out muffled into his chest.

"No?" Johnny asked.

He found that hard to believe. Daniel liked his classmates, and talking to people, he liked his professors. But he remembered their calls. He'd hoped though that Daniel had turned it around.

The arms around him tightened.

Johnny waited, fingers twirling locks of dark hair, he wasn't going to rush toward anything.

He'd missed Daniel. Missed the weight of him, the comfort of his breath, even if it was humid on his chest.

Calls were nice, but in person was better.

Daniel was comforting.

He wondered if something bad had happened but he was pretty sure Daniel would've mentioned. He'd talked a lot about- well he'd gotten side tracked a couple of times, maybe it'd been to ignore someone being mean?

Had someone picked a fight with him at the conference?

Were there other karate mechanics or black belt business people?

Johnny hoped not. Daniel didn't need to fend off people using mechanical equipment or with brief cases full of who knew what.

He just had to wait, and breathe and Daniel would tell him.

Patience.

The head on his chest slowly pulled up, big brown eyes looked at him and he frowned pouting. Lower lip jutting out.

Johnny wanted to bite it, a gentle tug of pressure.

"It was terrible huh?" Johnny asked, moving one of his arms to hook around Daniel's waist.

"Never again."

"Never again? Why?"

"I'm going to just stay here, forever."

"LA?"

"No. Closer."

"In our apartment?"

"Closer."

"On this couch?"

"Closer."

"On top of me?"

"Yes."

"You were looking forward to it though, you really didn't have any fun?"

Daniel looked away, at the flowers Johnny had brought home. Safflowers (welcome), gerber daisies in purple and red (love), and babies breath (everlasting love) then he turned back to Johnny.

"It was fine," he said with a sigh resting his chin on Johnny's sternum. "But I don't want to do it again. Only if I can shrink you down and keep you in my pocket."

"Wouldn't I get crushed?" Johnny asked hand sliding down Daniel's back into his back pocket.

"Not that pocket. I'd wear a shirt or a jacket with a chest pocket."

"So what would I do all day?"

"You'd have tiny books and a tiny blanket and it'd be very nice and cozy and I'd give you snacks, but most importantly I could reach into my pocket and pull you out to give you a little kiss whenever I wanted."

Johnny grinned. "Ah I see. You did the math and realized whenever you're gone for a long time you fall deeper into your kissing debt."

"Not my fault, you just need to be travel size," Daniel said holding up his fingers. "This big. And I'd give you all the snacks and treats and you could sleep next to me on my pillow. It'd be perfect."

Johnny laughed shaking his head. "I don't think you'd actually like it. But, speaking of kissing debt. I demand a payment."

"Demand a payment? I just got home."

"I know, but someone promised kisses," Johnny said untangling his fingers from Daniel's hair and tapping his own lips. "Payment at least on the interest please."

Daniel laughed, shifting forward. "I can't resist if you say please, very unfair."

His lips brushed warmly against Johnny's and then he pushed himself back and away and Johnny frowned.

"I believe though, you gave me a bunch of promises."

"What promises?" Johnny asked.

"You'd show me how much you missed me?"

Johnny pushed himself up, following Daniel. "I do remember that. I remember we had a couple long conversations about different things," Johnny said kissing him, holding him close. He wondered if he'd notice. If he'd remember. How long it'd take. He ran his hands along Daniel's sides, his hips.

"We've got all day right?" Daniel asked.

"Believe so. You bolted the door right?"

"I did."

"Then we should be good," Johnny said. "Though I believe what you said you missed was our bed?"

"Yes," Daniel said hopping up. He pulled on Johnny, tugging him gently towards their room.

"What would you like to do first?" Johnny asked.

Daniel studied him for a moment, at the clothes he wore, then looked up at him in shock. "You found the shirt?"

"Is think so, is this the right one, do you like it?" Johnny said.

It'd been in the back of the closet. A grim reminder of Sid but also of graduation and Okinawa. He hadn't been able to throw it out.

Daniel moved fast, knocking his legs out from under him and pushing him back onto the bed.

He blinked a little stunned.

It'd been a while since he'd seen Daniel use any karate, he'd stopped after the tournament as if it was cursed. Another thing to go in the back of the closet. As if he didn't want to have anything to do with it.

He barely was willing to do kata with him or Mr. Miyagi.

Johnny and Mr. Miyagi agreed to leave it alone. They didn't talk about karate.

Johnny focused on doing non-karate workouts when Daniel was around. But now he was on his back on their bed because Daniel had swept his feet. Had essentially thrown him on the bed. And not slow.

He hadn't telegraphed that.

It was fast. Like all those months without using it hadn't meant a thing.

Johnny pushed himself up as Daniel got on the bed, putting his hand on his chest and pushing him back down. Daniel settled on his hips leaning down and kissing him. Johnny gave back as best he could. He knew, absolutely was aware that Daniel was riled up. But he hadn't realized by how much. He'd underestimated.

Daniel pulled away and Johnny looked up at him feeling breathless. Daniel was running his hands over the shirt, palms pressing into his pecks, running down his torso, pressing and rubbing at his muscles through the silky shirt.

Johnny watched Daniel, he was focused, bitting his lower lip. Thinking, making a plan. He grabbed at Johnny's shirt and pulled.

Surprisingly, not as many buttons broke off as Daniel had probably wanted. But he got to do what he wanted.

The fabric did rip and he ducked down to kiss the exposed skin. To lick and bite where he could, like he'd been given a wrapped present and he was focused on unwrapping Johnny.

Daniel looked so pleased. Maybe Johnny could get more shirts he didn't care about. Maybe it was cathartic or something?

Daniel wasn't even paying attention as Johnny helped him out of his own shirt, as he tried to help Daniel get undressed. He was too focused on the skin he had in front of him.

Johnny ducked down, taking Daniel's hands and kissing them gently. Daniel kissed him back. He was a little lost in a horny haze. Quiet but in a focused way. Moving off of Johnny to get rid of the rest of his clothes, throwing it onto the floor of their bedroom.

Johnny reached out for him, to try pulling him close but Daniel slipped out of his grip, gathering supplies from the bedside table and getting ready.

Johnny reached for him again, sitting up and kiss his shoulder and arm, his chest and neck, peppering skin with kisses.

Daniel bit him sometimes, maybe he'd try it.

He let his teeth graze Daniel's neck, sucking a bruise. He went for Daniel's collar bone while Daniel's hands went between his legs, fingers slick, and he moaned softly into Daniel's skin. Daniel pulled away, slipping between his legs, guiding his thighs apart and kissing his inner thigh like promised, so reverently that Johnny's breath hitched and Daniel smiled up at him, too knowingly, too aware of the effect he had.

How he ever doubted himself Johnny didn't know, since he played Johnny like a puppet on a string, sending him to pieces, falling a part.

"Daniel," Johnny began, then tried to clear his throat when his voice came out uneven, heady.

"Hmm?"

"Don't listen to anyone or ever doubt, okay?" Johnny said.

"This is good?" Daniel asked twisting his fingers, breath warm on Johnny's thigh.

"Ye-yeah," Johnny said, though it came out more as a moan.

Daniel smiled pleased, the sort of pleased that was insufferable, but Johnny didn't care. It was true. Confidence was such a good look on him, even if he wore nothing else. Especially if he wore nothing else. Daniel pushed himself in and Johnny reached for him. Daniel caught his hands kissing them and holding them down gently but firmly on the bed.

"If that's a no, tell me," Daniel said before kissing the tip of his nose, his cheeks, his forehead and lips. Peppering him in warm soft kisses.

"It's not a no," Johnny said softly.

Daniel smiled at him kissing his neck. "I dreamed about you last night after we said goodnight."

"You did?"

"Mmhmm. We were hiking and the only way to get across this river was to walk through it. You took off all your clothes and in just your boots crossed the water and waited for me on the other side. I could get across. You told me I could do it and I'd get a reward if I did. So I figured out how to do it but I ended up falling in a couple times and getting soaking wet. You said I'd have to let my clothes dry so we went to a field and I set my clothes out in the sun to dry."

"What was your reward?"

"This," Daniel said smiling down at him as he rolled his hips. "You tried showing me the flowers that were in bloom but I asked you that question. What was my reward and you climbed on top of me and rode me and you said a lot of dirty things."

"So even though… we didn't have phone sex… you had a nice sex dream? You kind of get what you want… don't you?"

"Only to wake up and miss you so terribly," Daniel said leaning down and kissing him.

Johnny had missed him too. He wrapped his legs around Daniel's hips,

trying to pull him closer.

"Welcome home," Johnny said.

Daniel laughed softly, smiling warmly, free hand running along Johnny's body. "You're home. You know that? You're it. Wherever you are is home."

Johnny gasped as Daniel's hand wrapped around him.

"You're my home too," Johnny said, squirming a bit for more, moaning when he got it. Feeling better when Daniel kissed him. Teeth gently tugging at Daniel’s lower lip, deciding it was just as satisfying as Daniel made it look.

Chapter End Notes

Teriyaki salmon
Frankenstein by Mary Shelley
Slow Cooker Pot Roast

Where the Ocean Meets the Desert

Chapter Notes

> Previously the chapters were every other for POV. And there was a massive 100K chapter from Daniel. These final 15 chapters were originally supposed to Johnny's chapter, so a lot of it isn't the back and forth as it was. So it's more heavily Johnny's POV for a lot of this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"If you win then you can have whatever you want," Johnny said.

Daniel stepped in close, "That's a dangerous thing to promise Johnny."

His voice was low and Johnny laughed.

"It's not dangerous."

"It is. Why are you laughing?" Daniel asked surprised.

"You always want the same thing, it's sex, don't even try and deny it," Johnny said with a smile.

Daniel looked away flustered, blushing lightly. "Fine yes, but still, I could-"

"I've seen what you've put in the jar. I feel fine with this," Johnny said with a smile kissing Daniel's cheek.

"Really? Really really? Anything?"

"We'll give it a try. I know you Daniel. Plus your the one telling me to complain more. So I know if it's bad we'll stop."

Daniel nodded, gaze heated as he got over his shock. Johnny was going to fuel it just a little more. He stepped back, stretching, knowing Daniel was going to watch.

"As long as it's not you trying to lift me in the shower I think we're good."

"It was one time!" Daniel said, voice scandalized. "You're never going to let me live that down are you?"

"Never," Johnny said with a grin.

Daniel was nervous about his game and Johnny knew it. Knew that Daniel was still adjusting to his new life, to all these people in it. He'd just gotten comfortable with Johnny and his friends and was adjusting to Chozen and Louie being around. Now he was still getting use to school and his professors and his classmates. Sometimes he came back from school and his apprenticeship looking utterly drained.

Johnny wondered if some of it was because Dutch was gone. Wondered if he should visit more.

But he didn't know if Daniel was…out at school. He didn't know if he would automatically reach for Daniel's hand on campus and if it'd hurt them both if Daniel pulled his hand away. He'd seemed so surprised when Johnny didn't care to hold his hand anywhere. It'd made him happy but that didn't mean school was the same.

Daniel needed space to himself. And he was still healing.

Johnny had noticed he stayed close now. When they went dancing or anywhere crowded.

He was polite but didn't talk much to strangers and hadn't for a while. The conference had taken a lot out of him. It'd been useful but draining because Daniel was out of practice. Had dove in the deep end without back up and Johnny hadn't fully realized it until Daniel got home and wouldn't budge to let Louie sit between them like usual.

It'd been a couple of months and Daniel was trying again and he had a game. Taking those baby deer steps back into interacting with his classmates and strangers. And this game was a bigger one. An away game and they'd gotten popular after the last one.

It was going to be a lot of people and the atmosphere was going to be like a tournament and Daniel was so nervous. Understandably nervous. Daniel was tense. He held on tighter in their sleep. Like he was doing everything he could to hold on and hold on tight.

Johnny thought a treat might distract him. He already had a plan. He'd enact it soon.

Daniel was lost in thought, trying to decide what he wanted to do, where he wanted to do it.

Johnny kissed him on the cheek and walked past to make some tea.

Something calming before Daniel got himself too wound up in the opposite direction of where he already had been wound up.

There was time to think about it.

Johnny wore a track suit to the game, sitting in the crowd with the guys and Ali and Jenny, with Louie slapping him on the arm in excitement every time Daniel did something good or the other team did something he didn't agree with.

His arm hurt.

Mr. Miyagi was sitting nearby looking positively excited with Mrs. LaRusso and his mom.

Proud.

Mr. Miyagi had been talking about it at the shop, trying to learn the rules of soccer. Sato and Yukie would come over and help him study.

Chozen would swing by at lunch and complain. It was soccer all the time at home now that Daniel was on the soccer team and playing matches and it was boring. Who cared?

"It's my fault he didn't play in senior year," Johnny said. "So I'm going and going to cheer him on."

"You're over doing it," Chozen said with a sigh, passing an iced coffee to Johnny. "Daniel could've joined a different team right? There's YMCA teams and other non-school teams right? Clubs?"

"Yeah, but they cost money...sometimes."

"He could've talked to the coach to plea his case. He gave up, you can't fully blame yourself."

"Have you ever been scared of anyone?" Johnny asked.

Chozen thought sipping on his coffee. "Not really."

"Then you don't know. You do everything to avoid them. And I think I scared him."

"More I hear of it, less I think so. I think you were nuisance and scary...mmm...some times. But not all the time. I think Daniel

chicken."

"He's not a chicken."

"Daniel not accept defeat right? Not back down when against wall. You like that right? He pops back up and keeps fighting. But he didn't fight for soccer. Gave up on that one. I think unnecessary then. He didn't want it badly."

"Agree to disagree."

Chozen sighed. He stopped arguing when Johnny said that, closed up whatever else he had to say and set it aside, like it was a magic phrase and he didn't want to argue with Johnny.

"Heard from Kumiko."

"Yeah? How's she doing?"

"They just started La Traviata, opens in autumn. It's by that author you like. Old one. French."

"Alexander Dumas?" Johnny asked.

Chozen nodded. "She got the leading part. Violetta Valéry. Talked about it long time. Long long time. Almost talked as much as Daniel."

Johnny laughed. "She must be excited."

"Is. Very," Chozen agreed. "They'll take promo photos soon. I'll bring when she sends. Aunt Yukie is very excited. Sato thinks we should go opening night," Chozen drummed his fingers against his cup thoughtfully. "Johnny, you want to come with? See Kumiko opening night? Tokyo?"

"When is it?" Johnny asked.

Mr. Miyagi would probably want to go...if it was too long they'd have to shut down the shop. He didn't know if that was a good idea. But he liked the thought of being there to see her on her first night on stage.

He could get her a bouquet of daisies.

It'd also depend on Daniel's class schedule. He'd want to go too. And they did want to visit Dutch, maybe they'd take the time to do both.

"I'll find out. Tell you," Chozen said smiling warmly and turning,

pushing away from the counter heading to where his uncle was laughing and chatting with Mr. Miyagi.

Johnny watched Daniel run.

It was selfishly comforting to see him on the field running.

There'd been a time where he'd worried that that would never happen. That he'd hurt Daniel so badly he'd never get to run, that he'd never get to play soccer again. That he'd ruined Daniel's future. And then he'd felt guilty for loving him. Wondered if on some twisted level he'd broken Daniel to keep him from soaring to keep him down in darkness with him. But Daniel was happy and free and loved him regardless of where they'd started, regardless of the blood and pain.

It was, and he'd never tell Daniel this, similar to when one of the animals at the sanctuary was cleaned up and healed and could be released into the field to frolic and play. Like the overwhelmed sheep they got that hadn't been sheared in years, or the cows who'd been kept in cramped spaces. Once free they played and they seemed happy and Johnny liked watching them. Liked how they came up to him snuffling around for treats and scratches because they knew him, recognized him, trusted him.

He missed going there as much as he used to.

Daniel's team won. And as the team converged, as everyone in their section of the stands cheered Daniel's eyes searched for him, a knowing smile, a smirk, insufferable that he'd won, that he'd get his treat for winning.

They had dinner out, all together with their mothers and friends. Chozen even complimented Daniel on his win and he practically glowed under the praise, hand on Johnny's thigh but hidden by the table with a promise that he decided not to push it down, just shivered and drank his soda. Cheering with the others.

At the end of the night everyone dispersed and Daniel held out his hand. Johnny put his hand in Daniel’s and Daniel laughed softly.

“Not what I wanted.”

"What do you want?" Johnny asked.

"Keys."

"Huh?" Johnny asked.

"I get anything I want right?" Daniel asked, his smile warm, sweet, syrupy, knowing exactly what he was doing.

"I thought-"

"You promised," Daniel said stepping in close, arms wrapping around him, kissing him.

The keys to the Avanti. Only Jessica had driven his car and that was because there'd been a fight and his eye had been bruised.

He thought Daniel would say something like having sex on the beach again or want to try a seedy motel, because that was in the jar.

But a promise was a promise. And Daniel wasn't a bad driver. He wasn't like Louie.

He fished the keys out of his pocket and Daniel pulled away from the kiss taking them with a grin.

"You'll be careful right?" Johnny asked, following him uneasily.

"I'm careful with the Ford aren't I?" Daniel asked shooting him a pleased smile, fingers running along the Avanti.

Johnny stood there watching him get into the driver's seat.

"Let me take you for a ride Johnny."

Johnny opened the door to the passenger seat and sat down.

It was weird.

He rarely ever was anywhere other than the driver's seat of his car. He hadn't slept in it in ages, but even then he slept in the backseat. The passenger seat was always alien to him.

It was well stocked though. Always was. There was water in the trunk. An emergency kit. Spare tires. Blankets, his tent. A sleeping bag. Towels and changes of clothes. Soap and a toothbrush and toothpaste. Cans of food that wouldn't spoil. Oatmeal. He'd also put a box of condoms and lube in the glove compartment after realizing literally everywhere else they frequented had them. Like Daniel was a squirrel

or something and it was food he was burying and storing for winter.

Daniel adjusted the mirrors, adjusted his seat, messed with the radio and then turned to look at Johnny grinning, positively ecstatic.

"Ready?"

"As much as I can be," Johnny said softly.

His seat belt was on, he didn't know what to do with his hands. Normally he'd take one of Daniel's but he wanted Daniel to keep both hands free to be on the wheel if need be.

"Did you pick the Avanti because it's red?" Daniel asked, pulling out of the parking lot.

"Yeah. I wanted a red convertible."

Daniel nodded. He was thinking about something, something far away as his hands danced over the steering wheel.

Johnny relaxed. It was weird to be in the Avanti and not driving, but he watched the city pass, the lights of LA at night, wondering where they'd go.

"Tell me about the Avanti," Daniel said.

"Hmm?"

"The Ford was a birthday gift from Mr. Miyagi. I love that car, not because I practiced karate on it by waxing it, but because it was the nicest gift I'd ever gotten. You love this car."

"I do," Johnny said thoughtfully. "Well, I worked hard at the club to make money to buy it."

"Sid didn't-"

"No. Never. I didn't want a car from him. I'd...he'd...he was the type of person who'd keep an eye on mileage and complain about every cent of gas if I'd asked him for a car. I wouldn't have ever driven it except to take Ali on dates if it was something Sid gave me. No, I needed freedom I earned. So I worked at the country club after school and during breaks to save up. I got a lot of tips. And then my mom went with me.

“She hadn't known but like she knew Sid and I weren't on the best

terms ever, and some things she didn't fight, but she fought to go with me to get my first car. Said that cars were important to any kid and that I'd shown my responsibility with that job and it had made him look good and a nice car would also make him look good and she wore him down. I'd seen it while looking with Dutch for his van. Saw how much it was and worked hard to get it. It's one of a kind, a custom prototype that some how ended up on the lot.

"Other than your doctors appointment and the tickets to Okinawa, this is my biggest purchase and I want it to last a long time because before Mr. Miyagi and my bonsai this was my lifeline. I could escape any bad thing as long as I had this car."

"Your biggest purchase for yourself. Your only big purchase for yourself," Daniel said thoughtfully.

He was driving north. He sniffed rubbing his eyes and Johnny sat up turning to him.

"Hey you okay?"

"You need to start spoiling yourself."

"Huh?"

"Or I'm going to do it for you."

"Daniel?"

"It's unfair. To live in that big house and still get nothing. Like you left it with so few things except a whole bunch of scars. If you don't start I will."

"You will?" Johnny asked amused. "How are you going to spoil me?"

"You'll just have to wait and see."

"I'm quite happy as is," Johnny said.

"I know, but I want to, I'll figure it out. I've got a couple of ideas. But uh, did you like anything about the country club?"

"I'd figure you didn't like it?" Johnny said. "I mean you ended up covered in sauce."

"Yeah, but I didn't actually get to see or enjoy it. I mean is it worth it?"

"I don't know. That'd be a question for my mom. Honestly? I always had to go on Sid's behalf and I hated it. But going places with you would be nice, anywhere. Which, Chozen said that Kumiko's going to be in a ballet in Tokyo, they're planning to go for opening night."

"And he invited you?" Daniel asked, hands a little tighter around the steering wheel.

"He did. I was thinking, depending on when it is, you and I could also visit Dutch. It's only about 2 1/2 hours from Tokyo to Seoul."

Daniel's hands relaxed and he rested back in his seat, letting one hand leave the wheel to rest on Johnny's knee.

"I'm kind of hoping it's during your fall break," Johnny continued. "We could maybe visit Jessica over your summer break? Drive out to Ohio and stop in Chicago and get that pizza?"

Daniel gave his knee a gentle squeeze.

They were leaving the city. Were they starting that trip now? Couldn't be, Daniel had school on Monday. And then there was always something happening at his apprenticeship.

"I think that'd be nice. We'll do one over summer break and the other over the fall," Daniel said hand sliding up Johnny's thigh.

Johnny stayed still.

He had a plan.

He'd put a cooler in the trunk with wine from Jimmy. Wine he thought Daniel would like. Soda for himself. That had been when he thought he'd be driving. Now he wondered if he should've packed something he'd prefer to drink. Because maybe he'd be the one who could drink that night. He could save the wine for some other time he supposed.

He was used to thinking on his feet. Had for a long time. Adjusting plans as needed. Like changing his route to school if he saw the older kids or his classmates congregating, waiting for him.

He'd assumed they wouldn't be going home. Not with Louie still living with them.

Daniel needed a break. Louie had promised he'd call home and still

hadn't and Johnny could tell Daniel was getting frustrated. He avoided all Daniel's questions about why he was in LA and how things were going at home.

An additional burr was bothering him and he wasn't sure which one to help Daniel with. What he could even do. But Daniel was worse, better?, worse. Definitely worse.

He'd come up while Johnny was eating breakfast and drag his hands down Johnny's chest and squeeze. Johnny had learned to wait until Daniel was sitting down to put anything in his mouth.

He should've learned that from when they'd worked in the shop. But Daniel had seemed to have calmed down, reached an equilibrium when they'd been living together just the two of them, but he supposed as long as Daniel was stressed and there was pressure in his life Johnny was going to be a living stress ball. Like Daniel was a cat that needed to kneed something with his fingers and it was Johnny's muscles, or more accurately his pecs.

They were out of the city and in the desert now and it was cool and empty and dark. There were no cars on the road, vast flat emptiness for miles and miles and it was so quiet, except for the music on the radio.

"You liked the stars when we went camping," Daniel said, quietly but loud enough to be heard over the radio.

Johnny was going to freeze. But he smiled, gently placing his hand over Daniel's.

He had liked the stars. Liked seeing them over head but he wasn't particularly looking forward to sand again. The beach had been bad enough.

Daniel drove off the road.

"What?" Johnny yelped, surprised.

The Avanti was not built for off-roading. Not for the sand in the desert. Daniel's hand held onto his tight.

"It'll be okay, there's a spot I scoped out. I took the Ford and-"

The pleasant feeling Johnny had let Daniel cultivate evaporated.

He couldn't believe he'd let Daniel drive. He couldn't believe he let him drive him out of town and into the desert where he was trying to get them both stuck in the sand.

"Anything goes wrong I'll fix it," Daniel said, soothingly, letting go of Johnny's hand and placing both hands on the wheel, focused on where he was going.

There were some rocks off the road and he parked behind those.

Johnny stared at him, stunned. He wanted to scramble out of the car and check on his Avanti. His heart was pounding. He'd literally just...he'd.... he'd told Daniel and then Daniel had-

"I talked to the guy in charge of my shop, where I apprentice, and he said the Avanti would be fine."

"You told him what?" Johnny asked.

"I told him I wanted to go offroad just a little. I brought everything I need to make sure the Avanti is okay. You don't even have to worry about the sand. I'll keep your car safe," Daniel said leaning in close. "Just like you."

Johnny stared at him, looked out at the rocks they were behind for privacy, remembered the jar. Remembered watching Daniel cleaning sand off the Ford and asking why only for him to smile and say it'd been a test. He'd taken his beloved Ford out first, making sure it was safe for the Avanti.

It was okay. Daniel wouldn't ever do something as bad as Johnny had initially feared. He cared, he knew.

He leaned in and kissed Daniel. He could feel Daniel smiling, hands going to his track suit and Johnny grabbed his hands, stopping him.

"I thought-" Daniel said pulling away with a frown.

"Out of the Avanti," Johnny said, shooing Daniel.

"What?"

"If we're going to be out here, before you...before we... wait for me a couple minutes," Johnny said.

Daniel sighed pulling away talking about how he really wouldn't do anything that would damage the Avanti, he got it, it was a precious

thing, one of Johnny's few precious things, and he wasn't that heartless or unaware. But still getting out of the car.

Johnny opened his bag, looking through his cassettes, picking one and popping it into the player.

Daniel was leaning against the hood, back to him.

Johnny had learned a trick when he was dating Ali.

Ali layered.

An outfit she wore when leaving the house and then her true date outfit hiding underneath it. It was, in her case, to avoid arguments with her parents. To avoid delays getting out of the house and running down the steps to meet Johnny.

Johnny thought about not going through with it, because he was going to be cold. He'd dressed for LA, for the Valley where it was warm at night. But not for the desert where the temperatures dropped. But there was no way out now. He carefully shrugged out of the track suit, looking at his shoes. They didn't fit but he hadn't brought anything else because he hadn't planned...he hadn't expected to be out in the desert at night.

He'd planned to be barefoot.

He was going to have to stick with the original plan.

He was going to freeze, but whatever.

He folded up the tracksuit and walked towards Daniel on bare feet.

The sand was cold. It felt weird, but Johnny wasn't going to back down now.

"I figured we could start with a dance," Johnny said holding out his hand.

Daniel turned, smiling up at him, eyes on his face, then lowering, lowering, dragging down.

"Johnny," it was more of a breath, an exhalation then his name.

Johnny felt his skin burn and cleared his throat, waiting with his hand still outstretched.

Daniel took his hand but was still looking at Johnny's legs. Maybe he shouldn't have. Maybe it'd been enough to just follow Daniel, see what Daniel wanted to do, maybe he hadn't needed to-

Daniel pulled him close.

"I'll dance as long as I can but-"

Johnny could feel the reason, the heated gaze on his skin. Daniel's keen interest. Whatever interest level he'd been at had clearly tripled. Instead of his usual level it was more intense, more pressing, literally pressing against him.

"Damn," Daniel whispered, swallowing hard before stepping back taking a deep breath and focusing on Johnny's face, dancing to the music Johnny had picked.

The dancing helped. It'd been a while since they'd gotten to dance, since they'd gone to a club with one of the guys. Or all of the guys. It was one of those things that had disappeared with Dutch.

A loss that Johnny hadn't expected.

Louie wasn't really of an age they felt comfortable going to a club with and Daniel didn't like leaving him alone at home too long. Like he was one spark away from a bonfire.

Johnny spun, then spun back and that was fun. He thought he kind of got it now. It wasn't the point but it was still fun.

Daniel looked hungry. But he had that romantic desire that Johnny had. And it was kind of fun to be on the receiving end of it. Of Daniel holding on tightly to go through the motions of trying to woo Johnny whenever and wherever he could and dancing was a good one. He was a good dancer, arguably the best dance partner he'd ever had.

He'd enjoyed dancing with Kumiko but Daniel was passionate and always close.

He was still struggling though. Johnny had thrown him off course and he didn't know if it'd been a good thing or a bad thing.

"Johnny," Daniel said after a moment, clearing his throat and trying again. "Johnny where did you even find- where did you get this?"

"Called the sorority Bobby hangs out with," Johnny said.

The head of the house had gathered like four girls and they'd talked his ear off for like three hours. What to look for. What to ask. How to make sure it wasn't like a Halloween costume because the quality was apparently super shitty. How to make sure it was the right length without trying it on. How to clean it later.

To them it was a joke, like he'd lost his bet. Not something Daniel had expressly been interested in. But they took him serious.

It wasn't like he didn't play dress up with the kids he babysat, or hadn't worn kimono's with Yukie because she liked dressing up and having tea with him in Mr. Miyagi's garden and catching up. Because it made her feel more at home.

It always threw Chozen. He always stumbled over the steps when Johnny had tea with Yukie, he never fell, but he always stumbled, but Johnny supposed this was different. This was shorter. This was specific.

He hadn't wanted to ask anyone they knew. He supposed Bobby might hear of it. But he'd never talk about it. But he knew he couldn't ask Kumiko, or Jessica and for sure wouldn't ask Ali. And the sorority had been nice about it.

Daniel's hand was going low, dragging down his back past the hem of the skirt and hooking up his thigh. He was struggling.

Johnny hadn't expected that.

He expected Daniel to like it, but not that much.

What had he said? Easy access.

He was purposefully avoiding lifting the skirt up as they danced. Maybe it'd been too much.

"I also brought wine," Johnny said quietly. "But that was before I knew you were going to be driving. I brought soda if you'd like that instead."

Daniel cupped the sides of Johnny's face, kissing him. "What if I'd lost?"

"Then you wouldn't be driving the Avanti," Johnny said.

"You were wearing this already?"

"Yeah."

"I was wondering, you never wear...track suits," Daniel said fingers on the hem. "Are you...going to keep this?"

"I did buy it. I don't think it's something to return," Johnny said.

"Can we-?"

"What do you want to do?" Johnny asked.

It was interesting to see Daniel such a wreck. A loss for words but in a good way.

"I was planning..."

"To have sex in the Avanti?" Johnny asked.

He'd caught that one. Figured that's why Daniel had driven it behind some rock far from other people in the desert.

"Yeah," Daniel whispered. "The colors are even right, how did you-?"

Johnny laughed kissing him gently.

Daniel's brain was so scattered. Nervousness was fading. It was clearly a good thing. Or at least like dropping a kid in a candy store with a $100 and telling them to go wild.

"If I'm buying a cheerleader uniform it better match my boyfriend's team colors."

Daniel studied him thoughtfully turning them and backing Johnny up the way he liked to sometimes.

Johnny stopped. Rooted himself, adjusting his stance so he couldn't move.

Daniel frowned.

"The engine's still on. The hoods going to be too hot," Johnny said.

Daniel blinked. "Shit, right."

He seemed to make a decision, hands on Johnny's back. "Can I-"

"Yeah."

Daniel grabbed Johnny's ass then ran his hands lower, dragging the skirt up. He looked at Johnny surprised and Johnny flushed red.

"Nothing?"

"Well I was wearing pants so..."

He pressed his fingers close and Johnny put his hands on Daniel's shoulder to steady himself. "Daniel, lube."

"Right."

"Daniel."

"I just- yeah okay, got an idea," Daniel said digging around in his own pockets.

"There's some in the glove compartment. I thought you wanted to do it in the Avanti."

"I do, but- first I want to touch you," Daniel said giving up on finding whatever was in his pockets and hurrying to the Avanti, opening the glove compartment and slicking up his fingers and rushing back.

Johnny had told himself he'd go along with whatever ride Daniel wanted to go on. As long as it wasn't dangerous.

Daniel kissed him, arm around his waist holding him close as his fingers went back to where they'd been, pressing in carefully.

"Johnny," Daniel said. "You're so fucking pretty."

Johnny flushed red. Daniel let go of his waist, lifting the front of the skirt, looking down, taking his cock in his hand.

"Every inch of you is pretty."

That was a new one, but his thoughts were short circuiting because Daniel was moving his fingers and his hand the way he liked it, right where it made it difficult to focus.

He gripped Daniel's soft jacket tightly in his hands. Maybe it was the skirt, maybe it was how short it was or maybe it was the way Daniel had been looking at him, combined with how he was touching that made it difficult to stay calm, to much more than hold Daniel's jacket like he need purchase on something because it was happening too fast.

"Daniel."

A warning that he wouldn't last, if he wanted him to last it wasn't going to happen. They'd have to stop and he didn't want to stop.

Daniel kissed him, smiling warmly at him. "Come on Johnny, let go."

Unfair.

For him to be focused now when Johnny wasn't, like as soon as he got his hands on Johnny he regained balance and Johnny lost it. But Johnny did, bare knees shaking and he nearly sunk into the sand when it was over but Daniel held him up, against him.

"I think I get why cheerleaders are so popular now," Daniel said smiling at him kissing him gently.

"What?" Johnny asked dazed.

"They bring cheer. Up peoples spirits like you up mine. And I get a nice view of your legs in this skirt, and what legs they are."

Johnny wasn't sure if that made sense but pressed his face against Daniel's shoulder, waiting to catch his breath, shivering in the cold breeze of the desert. He almost regretted saying no to the hood of the Avanti. At least that'd be warm. But he might've gotten burned. Or both of them might've.

Daniel ran his hands through Johnny's hair soothingly.

"I wish I could pick you up."

"You want back problems and knee problems before you're thirty?" Johnny asked.

"Aha, I knew that'd get something out of you."

"Didn't you already do that?"

"Yeah I suppose so."

He sounded so smug. So pleased with himself.

"You know my school has a gym and the soccer team works out sometimes. I think I'm going to join them. So the next time-"

"There's going to be a next time?"

"For the skirt? Or sex?" Daniel asked carefully. "Was it bad? Do you dislike it?"

"The skirt. I figure there will always be sex and no, it wasn't bad. I assume based on what's pressing against my thigh it's not over either."

"I'd prefer if it wasn't, but up to you. Can we continue?"

"In a minute."

"A minute?"

"Don't tell me your checking your watch."

"What? No. Of course not. Okay, yes, yes I am. But-okay don't judge, that was very hot okay, so I want to- well if it's okay... The skirts very hot. Like your little robe you used to wear."

"Your the one who asked me not to wear it."

"Only when we have company."

"So for a while."

"Is that why you wore this under your clothes?"

"Well I'm not going to wear it at the apartment while we have company."

"Just when I think things are starting to get okay with Chozen… Louie has to move in. You know I've asked him fifteen times this week to call his parents."

"I know," Johnny said pushing himself back a bit, feeling steadier.

"Like why us?"

"You're cool so of course you," Johnny said. "If I didn't already live with you I'd want to live with you."

"I should hope you'd want to live with me. Bit late if not," Daniel said kissing him again. "But I also want to live with you. I do not want to live with Louie."

Johnny shrugged. "It's your own fault for being too cool. Too awesome to live with."

"Are you just saying all of this because you orgasmed. What do you want?" Daniel said suspiciously.

"For us not to ruin my leather seats."

"Johnny, I would never, I swear, never ever do anything to purposefully hurt your car," Daniel said walking around to the trunk of the Avanti.

Johnny shivered, folding his arms across his chest.

"And you don't need to butter me up on that front."

"I was teasing."

"I know you were," Daniel said studying the wine and the soda, grabbing the cups and a blanket. "Aren't you freezing?"

"I am. I really wasn't expecting us to be in the desert."

"Where did you think we'd go?"

"No clue. But this wasn't what I thought."

"If I'd picked dancing at a club would you still have worn that?"

"Out? No."

"Then when would I have seen it?"

"Bedroom maybe?"

"So you were going to wear a cheerleaders uniform under your tracksuit all night just in case?"

Johnny nodded while Daniel opened the door to the backseat and laid the blanket down like he was making up a bed for a guest. Not like he was laying down a blanket in Johnny's own car. But the view was nice so Johnny didn't complain and didn't try to stop him. It'd also be warmer.

Daniel sat on the seat, the door open looking at him, waiting. Johnny looked at the front of the car, at the music still softly playing, the headlights on, the engine running softly.

"You want to turn it off?"

"Well we're not using the light anymore. I don't want to drain the battery and then we're stuck out here."

"We wouldn't freeze to death."

"I know," Johnny said walking over and turning off the car.

The lights turned off and they were flooded by silence and darkness.

"That might be better actually," Daniel said.

Johnny walked back around, debating getting in the other side and ignoring what Daniel wanted, but he walked back around to where Daniel sat in the darkness, his eyes adjusting to take him in.

"How so?"

"Now I'll just hear you," Daniel said pulling him down and onto his lap.

Johnny stumbled a bit in the sand, grabbing hold of Daniel to steady himself.

Daniel's hands were warm on his hips, really all of him was warm and that part was nice. He pressed in close as Daniel hooked an arm around his waist carefully pouring him a drink.

"I thought you were in a hurry," Johnny said taking the drink offered to him.

"I'm trying to behave," Daniel said hand on his thigh.

"Since when?" Johnny asked with a laugh.

"Hey, it's very difficult. But I do and I am."

"Daniel I'm still good, that anything still applies. I'll speak up if it's a no, promise. Like the hood of the car."

The hand sliding up his thigh paused and a thumb pressed along his inner thigh.

"Then I want you to know, just in case I researched it and know how to clean up leather seats as well, so just in case, don't get worried. And I brought the stuff to clean it."

Johnny sighed sipping at his drink. "I'm sorry for getting stressed out. I

know you wouldn't do something with the Avanti without thinking it through. I know you're prepared. That you like to plan. I just-Sid tried a lot of ways to destroy this car so it's like a gut reaction."

Daniel's arm around his waist left and came to cup his face.

"I'm sorry Johnny. You didn't deserve Sid. No one should've had to deal with that bastard. But you, you didn't deserve to be treated like that, you were just a kid. You were just a boy."

Johnny looked away a lump in his throat.

"Sometimes I want to agree with Chozen. This is one of those things I agree with him on," Daniel said.

"You agree with Chozen?" Johnny asked surprised.

"I want to agree with him," Daniel said with a sigh. "Prison is too good for him. I wish I'd given him a good punch at the very least."

Johnny turned his face towards Daniel's hand still cupping his face and kissed his palm. "Sorry for ruining the mood. I appreciate the thought though."

Daniel's other hand left his thigh to cup the other side of his face. "You are going to be okay Johnny. You're going to thrive. You're going to do whatever the hell you want and you're going to have a better life than he could've even dreamed of. And I wasn't lying. I'm going to spoil you first chance I get. I'll figure out something, but just you wait. It's going to be amazing."

Johnny smiled softly. "Don't you already spoil me?"

"No. Whatever you're thinking of. That's a no. I do not. Not nearly enough. But I'm gonna. Because, you spoil me."

"I do not."

"You do. You really really do. You took care of my leg even when I didn't want to think about it. You spent time with me when I wasn't fun. You picked the slow lane to walk by my side. Wherever that led. You learned how to do push ups with a person on your back for me. And you still do it. When we're watching TV sometimes. And it's a delight to sit on your back while you do that even if Louie complains. Or to hold your ankles when you do sit ups and get kisses for helping. You took the time to spar with me. You spent all your money on me.

And then when you got more you spoiled me on my birthday.

“I know when we started dating you told me you didn't need much. You were just happy I liked you back. And I know that's how you feel. I know that you could be happy no matter what. But you're the one who pushed me to go out on my own, and I...I think you saved me a lot of miserable time. Probably years. You knew I'd come up with something for tonight and yet you still remembered when I talked about you in a cheerleading uniform and you figured out where to get one and wore it. You always surprise me and spoil me. So one day I'm going to figure out how to return the favor."

"So you're going to wear a cliche nurse's outfit the next time I get sick?" Johnny asked amused.

"I was thinking of something a little more. You really are easy to please."

"Just with you."

"Was that an innuendo?" Daniel asked grinning at him.

"Maybe," Johnny said setting his drink in the cup holder and kissing Daniel. "It's been well over that minute."

"So you're saying, you're good to go again?"

"Yes," Johnny said moving to face Daniel, legs on either side of his.

Daniel smiled slipping his hand up Johnny's top, giving his pec a squeeze. His hands had cooled in the cold desert night and Johnny shivered. Daniel shifted his position, sliding down a little and spreading his legs so that there was less beneath Johnny, more space, slipping his other hand under the skirt, fingers finding their way back inside. Sudden and easily as Daniel kissed him.

He moved his hands towards the zipper of Daniel's jeans, reaching for that warmth, for Daniel, hard in his hands, there for a moment before Daniel moved, pulling up close and up, the hand on his pec gone, digging something out of his pocket, a condom that Johnny took, carefully rolling it down.

"Ready?"

"Yeah," Johnny said as Daniel guided him down and onto his cock. Not deep, but a start.

"You okay?" Daniel asked looking up at him.

"Yeah," Johnny said, putting his hands on Daniel's shoulders to steady himself, before slowly sinking the rest of the way down, drawing out a satisfying sound from Daniel whose hands had settled warmly on his hips.

Johnny pushed himself up, just a bit, moving, trying to start a pace. He'd done this before but there'd been more space in their bed. And the bed was more comfortable.

Daniel's grip tightened and Johnny stilled.

"Gonna move," Daniel said.

How? Johnny wanted to ask but then Daniel was shifting carefully supporting Johnny as he laid Johnny down on the backseat.

Daniel pulled Johnny back closer to him, readjusting, finding spots to put his weight, like his hand next to Johnny's head, other hand holding one of Johnny's legs.

"This okay?"

Johnny nodded. He looked up at Daniel in the dark hovering over him. He reached up, gently brushing dark hair back from his face, knowing it was a lost cause, but unable to help himself. He let his fingers trail down the side of Daniel’s face, touching his lips. Lips that parted and licked his fingers. Johnny shivered, not just from the cold this time. The eyes on him were molten.

Daniel dipped down, kissing him, like he'd been holding back and Johnny struggled to keep his breath steady. But he didn't care.

It was like waves, like the ocean that lulled him to sleep all those years, breath came when it did in bursts, when he remembered. Like his body remembered the pleasure from before, the promise that Daniel always brought with his touch, and it was overwhelming but, the mouth on his, the tongue tasting him, was so full of words that there wasn't time to breathe, except when necessary. Except when the waves crashed.

An ocean in the desert.

Maybe, a part of mind thought, his whole life had been a desert. Things bloomed. Things lived. But it was difficult. And Daniel was an

ocean. Full of depths, full of sound and passion and storms and life. Different life. And together, the sand, the ocean, the waves, the breeze, the stars in the sky, could become something new.

Maybe a forest, or a field of wildflowers.

Something beautiful.

"Are you okay?" Daniel asked, concerned, stilling his movements. "Are you hurt?"

Johnny looked up at him confused, then felt his face.

Tears.

Huh.

Not trusting himself to speak, pushing himself and wrapping one arm around Daniel, kissing him again.

Daniel kissed him back, a little thrown, but he found his way back.

After, Daniel wrapped him in the blanket and Johnny laughed a watery laugh when he realized Daniel was attempting the burrito wrap he did sometimes half asleep to Daniel. He tried curling up with Johnny, muttering apologies and curses as he tried to find a comfortable way to lay with him.

"You need a bigger back seat," Daniel murmured.

"That is how people pick out cars," Johnny said with a laugh. "By making sure there's enough space for them to lay down with their lover, comfortably."

Daniel sighed. "I know."

"We can blame it on the fact that I picked out this car before I met you, I'll keep it in mind next time. Maybe I should get a van, like Dutch, or a pick up truck. You know there's all these design ideas for vans now. With beds and shag carpeting, it's almost a house. Could get a lava lamp or something and stick a water bed in there."

"You're joking. I can totally tell you're teasing me," Daniel complained, holding Johnny close. "Are you avoiding...something?"

He looked so worried and Johnny wiggled a little to free his hand and touch Daniel's face, to gently touch his cheek.

"I don't think I can explain it-"

Daniel frowned.

"It's kind of weird," Johnny said quickly bringing his hand back under the blanket, pulling it up a little higher.

"Did it hurt? Did I hurt you?"

"No."

"I was just thinking that...I feel like the desert."

"You feel like the desert?" Daniel said eyebrow raised. "Sorry, continue."

"But you feel like an ocean."

"Hmm."

"I like the ocean. And I thought maybe together we can change, you know? Like ecosystems come back to life? The desert is it's own ecosystem. There's nothing wrong with it, but I was thinking...that we can become something new, full of life you know? Like a prairie full of wildflowers or a forest. Something different," Johnny pulled the blanket around him, burying himself deeper in it, embarrassed. "Like I said, it's just a weird thought. But nothing hurt."

Daniel gently lifted Johnny's chin and kissed him, soft and gentle, pressing his forehead against his.

"That's some Mr. Miyagi stuff there. Give me time to think about it, because I'm pretty sure there's something terribly sweet in that that my brain can't parse through at the moment. Metaphors and stuff."

"Sorry, for ruining it."

Daniel looked startled, cupping Johnny's face in his hands, brushing his thumbs over Johnny's cheeks. "You did nothing wrong, you didn't ruin anything. Absolutely nothing to apologize for. It's emotionally healthy to cry, right? I feel like I read that in a magazine or Ma said that, but it's true."

"But like that," Johnny murmured trying to disappear into the blankets. He could feel his ears burning.

"You know, we should probably be surprised you haven't cried during

sex more than this."

"That does not make me feel better," Johnny said.

"Sorry, what I mean is..."

Daniel stopped trying to keep hold of Johnny's face letting him disappear into the blanket and instead hugged him tight.

"-with everything that's happened in your life, you never know when something is going to suddenly inexplicably set off an emotion. I mean in general I have that. I just hadn't realized it. When we went to New York for that school trip it was like walking straight into a wall. If you weren't there, if I wasn't so sure that you'd just wander off and get hurt and if I hadn't made it my job to keep an eye on you I probably would've broken down multiple times. Just memories of my dad absolutely everywhere. I'm not surprised I broke down on the Ferris Wheel even though I was so aghast after and in the moment that I did. But you and the guys, it was comforting to let you in. I hadn't realized how tightly I'd like clamped down on that.

"Or, hey you remember at the lodge when I opened my bag and like the smell of that sweater hit me? My legs were like jello. I probably would've panicked or like completely freaked out, but you figured out a solution and gave me comfort. Someone to lean on. It happens. Maybe it was the desert, maybe it was the Avanti, maybe you've just had a day, or maybe you hyped yourself up and then got nervous or relaxed a lot and maybe a dam of emotion released. Since you're adamant I didn't hurt you then, if you're fine, if you're okay then I'm just here. You can hide in there if you want. I'm still thinking about your metaphor."

"But-"

"You know, if you don't want to do something, please tell me right? Or just don't do it, speak up if it hurts. Or if I'm too rough. That's what I was worried about. Hurting you."

"I said no to the hood of the Avanti," Johnny murmured.

"I can't believe I nearly put you on a hot hood of a car. I know that's too hot. I work with cars. It's like an hour before that thing cools enough to touch."

"Sometimes you make dumb choices, like the shower."

Daniel sighed. "If all the blood heads south sometimes you gotta stop me from myself. Before I hurt both of us on accident."

Johnny laughed softly.

"What are you going to do about your Polaroid? You're going to have to change your little note," Daniel asked.

"I'll just add to it, parenthesis unless horny."

"Is there enough room? Daniel LaRusso January 1985, Mountain High Has good ideas, always listen to him. (Unless horny) You sure there's enough space?"

"I'll write tiny."

"What if I'm always horny? I feel like I'm always down, or up, you know?"

"What do you want me to add? Unless horny, which he always is. So really stop listening to his ideas?"

"No, oh god no, you listening to me is like catnip. If you stop listening I may just wilt."

"I can't stop listening. Hmm ‘except during sex’?"

"If you don't listen then you won't turn as red, right? I don't like that," Daniel said.

"Use caution when horny?"

Daniel laughed softly. "That feels more accurate. You need to have some bad ideas or else I'm just going to feel awful."

"I worried that the skirt was a bad idea," Johnny said softly. "That it was too...forward."

"Too forward? Impossible. I love it. But not because it's a skirt. But because it's you. Because you listened to some horny rants I had and took it seriously. My plan was literally let's have sex in the backseat of the Avanti with the top down. And here you packed wine and soda and decided to have fun. And it is fun. Really I should be the one apologizing to you."

Johnny frowned, wiggling out of the blankets just a little to see him better.

"Why?"

"You made a romantic date night and I just wanted to bone. I completely struggled to stay focused."

Daniel moved so they could look at each other easier.

"I didn't do all the romantic stuff. And we don't get to do that as much any more either. Not with my apprenticeship and school and Louie being here. You turned it into a date, a really nice date, and I messed that up."

"You danced with me."

"Not enough," Daniel sighed, running his fingers through Johnny's hair. "I want more of everything. I want more dancing, I want more dates, I want more time with you and this was the perfect moment to enjoy those things, but I couldn't be patient."

"Being impatient would've been trying to have sex in the sand...again."

"Not a fan of sex on the beach, noted," Daniel said amused.

"I'm glad you liked it."

"The skirt? I liked you in it. I liked that you listened to me. You know my family talks a lot right? Like you got to see that first hand. It's just a wall of noise any time more than one of us gathers. I don't know how you're surviving with me and Louie at the apartment. We talk everyone's ears off. And people...stop listening. You can tell. Their eyes sort of glaze over. Like Louie listens to me maybe half the time, more for cool ideas or things to copy or whatever. Ma listens to me maybe about a third of the time if I'm lucky, she tunes in and she tunes out. It's this annoying thing we all learned how to do. I think...you listen really well you know? And you remember dumb shit I say. And you take action.

"You make a plan and then you give me the weirdest things I request. You learned how to make mac and cheese for me. You've fixed everything I ever half mentioned at the shop and the apartment. And I say that I thought you'd look hot in a skirt because I couldn't get the idea of your thighs out of my head and your legs, because you can do those damn high kicks and you did one when we took a shower and tried, well I tried to lift you, and I think my heart skipped a damn beat when you did that. It's like I know you're a karate badass but sometimes I forget, because if you've slept real good after a long night

of love making you just aren't quite awake, which is like a different kind of compliment. I take like a stupid amount of pride when you can barely function in the morning.

“Because it means, and maybe this is me just giving myself too much credit, but that I fucked you so good that you sleep well and can't think straight. Like I love those mornings because you run on auto pilot and your auto pilot is to be cuddly and sleepy and completely unaware of how damn hot you are.

“There was a point to this. I got lost somewhere. Your thighs? Listen, maybe that's because like I started touching your knee right? Because you couldn't handle anyone touching your like shoulder or anything close to your neck. And well then I got a little devious because I got upset and shit was it when I scratched you? Which I’m so so sorry about. I really didn’t mean to scratch you. I don't know if that was it, but I got my hands on your thighs and I couldn't stop it. It's like you know how maybe a couple will start with holding hands or whatever and then there's like old movies where they're wearing gloves all the time and holding hands and then they take off their gloves and hold their hands for the first time and there's something about that first touch of skin to skin contact? And everyone is like well damn. That's how I feel about your thighs. I just like touching them. I've got a lot of stuff I like to touch. Truly. And like the skirt gave so many options. Thigh, legs, ass, dick. Whatever I wanted to touch without like a barrier just like a hide and seek but like dirtiest hide and seek and also best hide and seek.

“Wait no this isn't where I was going. But see? Horny brain. Before your leg...before the high kick. Look at you just listening to me. That was it. That does shit to me. Maybe it's silly. Maybe it's weird, but I was reading all these magazines you know? Like while I was waiting for stuff and you read like all these advice magazines and people will write in and you realize, oh people are into that huh? I didn't know that was a thing. Point. The point is that like you listen to me and it effects me okay? Like this? This effected me. You didn't just hear me you listened and you took such a silly random thought and you put in all this work. Like you called people, got recommendations, bought it or ordered it, tried it on and decided to wear it to my game. Under normal clothes so it could be a surprise. Something just for us. It's not just that you put on a skirt and that I get to see your beautiful legs or touch you, it's all the effort that went into it.

“Like I thought you were upset and I was freaking out. Like I fucked up. Of course I fucked up. It's the Avanti and I didn't just drive it to

the desert I drove it in the damn sand, right after you told me how much this car meant to you and how hard you worked for it and then here I was freaking out and leaning against the thing so I knew it was hot, how that didn't stick with me I don't know, and then you start playing music and you held out your hand and asked to dance and I was like oh. It was like a balm. But then I realized you weren't wearing the track suit and I didn't recognize that shirt because it's not a shirt and then I took everything in, the top, the skirt, your bare feet as if we were on the beach and not as if there could be scorpions out in the sand. And you remembered.

"You remembered and you looked hot and leg, so much beautiful leg. But you'd heard me and you listened and you'd done all this for a whim of mine and you know how someone feels when they get drenched in water and like the shock of that and how it's usually a bad thing? It was like that but a good thing. Well I suppose. All the blood headed south and my mind went blank. And I'm sorry about that. It wasn't just the skirt or your legs, it was, that knowing. Does that make sense? That you listen, you retain all this information that no one else every listens or cares about. Like you bought those seedless grapes because I can't stand the seeds and I was so used to people ignoring that. The things I actually like. It...cuts deep but like in a good way. It's this sudden blinding feeling of being seen? If that makes sense...at all. Since I'm talking about you hearing me, listening. But it's overwhelmingly good."

"I find it comforting."

"What?"

"Listening to you talk."

"I don't get it, but I love it," Daniel said. "I feel incredibly lucky."

"You listen too."

"I doubt nearly as well as you do," Daniel sighed.

"I suppose, you feel seen because I listen. But I feel seen because you see me. You look at me, you touch me, you make sure I'm included, you ask me questions. You don't let me fade into the background or run away. You make me coffee the way I like it, you make dinner when I'm tired and I don't know how you know I'm tired-"

"You droop a little."

"Like a plant?" Johnny asked with a laugh.

"You telegraph," Daniel said. "It's in your body language. Like when you're tense. It's in the way you stand, hold yourself. It's in your voice when I get home, your eyes."

"I feel like...after being ignored, and purposefully misunderstood by Sid and unable to really figure out how to communicate with my mom or knowing how to be a good friend to my friends all I learned was to listen and act, it's how I survived. And I mostly felt I went...unseen."

"I see you, and if you want or need to be seen better, let me know. I like looking," Daniel said with a big grin. "I like studying your body, but I also like listening to you and I want you to be comfortable around me and to feel safe. So if I get it wrong, because to err is human right? Let me know. I'll listen. I don't want to be anything like Sid and you should be listened to. As keenly as you listen to everyone else. You should be spoiled. You should be heard and seen. And loved. Showered in love. Until everything is warm and fuzzy around the edges and cozy."

"I feel surprisingly cozy right now."

"Yeah?"

Johnny nodded. "You got the soft blanket I like."

"It is the softest one we have."

"I was cold."

"I was wondering," Daniel said with a smile. "I didn't know if that's why your nipples were hard or if I was doing a good job."

"I wasn't expecting the desert."

"Clearly, what if there'd been a scorpion?"

"We didn't have sex in the sand."

"I know but you were barefoot. I'd have been pissed if something stung you."

"Finally get to jump to my defense then huh?"

"Yeah me versus an arachnid. You're the one who takes those guys outside at the apartment. You think I could handle a scorpion?"

"I mean you might. You'd have to catch it if it stung me so the doctors would know which one."

"Can't just describe the guy? About yea big, pointy bit on it's tail, scuttled off into the sand," Daniel said, holding out his fingers.

"Nope, could've been a baby."

"Big macho karate guy gets stung by a venomous baby," Daniel said with a laugh.

"Boyfriend fails at catching it and panics whole way to the emergency room. Neither willing to explain what happened."

"Okay okay mutually another stupid idea. But tell me where else can we park and have sex?" Daniel asked.

"Aren't there spots specifically for that?"

"I'm not taking you to some hook up spot where all the cars are shaking."

"I wonder if it's bad for the suspension."

"You're worried about the suspension? I'm not going to ask my boss."

"No? Not even a little curious? Also do you even know any hook up spots?"

"What? You don't think I heard of the local spots at school?"

"I just didn't think you paid attention to that stuff."

"Last semester of high school I was keenly focused on all the sex tips and dating tips I could gather trying to figure out why as much as I flirted you just didn't seem to notice. So yes, I do know of a few of the hook up spots. And college students share even more of them."

"And you don't want to go?"

"No, I don't want to listen to other people having sex. I want to listen to you, just you moaning or cursing or asking for more or telling me how much you love me. I don't want to listen to some other couple," Daniel said.

"So no orgies in the future, got it," Johnny said with a laugh.

"Could you even handle that?"

"Probably not," Johnny said.

He could barely handle Daniel paying attention to him and lovingly touching him. Other people touching him, multiple people? He'd probably black out. Or cry. It was bad enough when he cried during with Daniel.

"It took so long to get through to each other, to hear and listen on a romantic and intimate front that I don't want to share," Daniel said.

Johnny smiled softly, reaching out, wiggling out of the blanket cocoon kissing him gently. "I want to be selfish too. I want to spent time with you. Whenever we can. I feel bad, because Louie needs support, but I also want to just spend time with you. Which is why I offered. Why I wanted to see what you came up with. Because I miss just laying here talking to you, I miss it being just you and I. I miss having the apartment to ourselves. I miss when you looked at me with desire and acting on it, or at least flirting up as storm so I caught on."

"I missed it all too, and part of me doesn't want to go home. I want to stay here in the back of your car, on this tiny tiny seat."

"It's not that small."

"I'm glad you're not claustrophobic. Glad you like having me up in your space, because if I budge I will be on the floorboards."

"Good luck finding a car that's as nice as the Avanti with a bigger back seat. I bet you the Ford's backseat isn't much bigger."

"Oh we're just going to have to test it out."

"Where?"

"Ugh, that's what I've got to figure out. Because now, honestly? Paranoid about scorpions."

"We can put the top up and roll up the windows if you'll feel better."

"I might," Daniel said. "You'll stay down here right? So you don't get hit as the top goes up?"

"Yeah."

Daniel kissed him and pulled away, taking a surprising amount of

warmth with him as he moved to put the top up and roll up all the windows. He seemed to be looking around on his way back, scanning, Johnny assumed, for scorpions.

Johnny pulled on him, tugging him back down towards him.

"You did great at your game you know."

"Yeah?"

"Scored some great goals, you were fast on your feet, it was impressive."

"Why thank you," Daniel said with a grin. "Always glad to please a fan."

"Big fan. I was wondering how do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Play games with teams that aren't completely enamored with your beauty?"

Daniel laughed. "Well you see, they don't see me."

"Ah, because you're too fast?"

"Yeah, and because everyone's eye is on the ball."

"What a sight they're missing."

"You think huh?"

"Oh I know. Again, huge fan. I heard though that you have one problem."

"What could that possibly be?"

"Well I hear that you are perpetually horny. How on earth do you handle that?"

"Well I make dumb choices sometimes because of it, but mostly I just politely ask my boyfriend if he'd like to have sex."

"And if he says yes?"

"Then I'm a lucky guy if he thinks he can handle another round,"

Daniel said carefully slipping his hands into the blanket. "If he's not pushing himself."

"Curiosity really, and maybe in the same boat," Johnny said shivering as they moved, finding a way to align. A way to meet in a different way in the back of the Avanti. A new way to see one another just a little clearer.

Chapter End Notes

Scorpion stings symptoms and how it's treated
How to clean "stuff" off car seats
I totally get it if you don't want to read that. It's pretty much how to get rid of the stains off anything from goodhousekeeping. But essentially cold water. Don't use hot water it'll stain. Blot. If that's not working use a weak detergent solution or a spray upholstery cleaner but test it somewhere that you wouldn't notice first. And then work with a soft brush. The Avanti's seats are leather, so it's not cloth based so really just a cloth with cold water should work.

Also uh, don't drive your car off into the desert if it's not built for offroading. Tire pressure has to be played around with when driving on sand and you can totally get stuck. So you gotta take a shovel with you. (Daniel's got one in the trunk) Here's some tips for driving in sand. But again, please don't be like try this at home (or you not not at home) without being careful. It can 1000% damage your car. So just imagine that shortly after this Daniel had to drive the car back onto the road and then went to work cleaning sand off of everything before driving them home and then cleaning it again at home in the garage while Johnny teased him by asking if it was worth it. Daniel's answer is 100%.

Rest is Mandatory

Chapter Notes

We've moved forward a bit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Johnny walked into the garage, looking for the Daniel. He felt a little nervous, he hadn't visited Daniel at the garage before. Sometimes he waited for Daniel outside of the college campus grounds but he knew Daniel was enjoying the freedom of being relatively unknown. Not infamous because of the All Valley or Cobra Kai.

Daniel hadn't ever said that he didn't want Johnny coming by for lunch, but Johnny didn't want to be in the way. He didn't want to ruin whatever life Daniel had created for himself, but he hadn't looked good that morning. He'd been running out the door and in a hurry so Johnny hadn't had a chance to catch him and investigate, but he thought, maybe, Daniel was sick.

He'd brought lunch as an excuse. To check on Daniel. A bento box Yukie had given him with rice and a canteen of soup and little hot dogs cut up to look like octopi and tamagoyaki that Mr. Miyagi had taught him how to make and a fried fish.

It wasn't cute, not like the bento's Yukie had brought to the shop one day with a little bear sleeping under an omelet blanket, but it'd do the job. Mostly the soup and rice.

He hoped he wasn't being too overbearing. That he wasn't overstepping some unseen boundary that they hadn't talked about. He worried about smothering Daniel, being too much. But being sick required rest. Lots of rest. And Daniel had been putting in long hours and was tired and Johnny knew how that could knock one out.

Rest wasn't optional, it was a requirement. Something he'd fought against for a long time thinking he could do everything and survive on cat naps on the beach.

But Daniel was the one who taught him sleep was important. A combined effort between him and Mr. Miyagi. They'd made such a comfortable safe space for him to sleep that he did. And if he could

return the favor? If he could help Daniel with whatever the source of his stress was and make sure he took good care of himself then it'd be...well it'd feel nice.

"Hello! Nice Avanti, what seems to be the issue?" A man in greasy overalls asked wiping his oil covered hands on a handkerchief. "Such a bummer that the company went bankrupt."

He stepped in close towards Johnny, studying the Avanti.

"Actually, how's yours still out and about? All the convertibles were recalled. No one's got one anymore."

Johnny bit back his go-to response which was that he didn't need their help because if something went wrong with his car he could fix it himself. That feeling he always had in the pit of his stomach that he didn't want a stranger touching his car. The way it sent off all the alarm bells in his head.

He breathed.

It wasn't the same.

Not like after he got the Avanti and brought it home all excited with his mom and Sid had recommended he take it to a mechanic to check on it, all fake warm smiles of a proud man, proud of the car his step-son bought and had saved up for, that he'd made such a responsible choice.

Not like when Johnny had still hoped and trusted just a little, and taken his car to the mechanic at the first little strange sound, trusting. only for later the Avanti to be worse, to rattle. Not until he overheard one of Sid's calls, telling the mechanic to slowly destroy the Avanti. Little things here and there every time it came in, until Johnny couldn't afford to have it "fixed" any more. A win win. The perfect lesson for a little monster.

Johnny had tried taking his Avanti to another mechanic, hoping he'd get whatever was wrong with it fixed. And it'd worked, at first. Until Sid found the receipt, the business card, some clue as to where Johnny had taken his business for his car's maintenance and the cycle began again.

Johnny caught it earlier that time and realized he couldn't take his car anywhere, couldn't go to anyone without Sid buying them off. Sid wanted him to have a car so that he didn't ask for rides, he wanted

Johnny to be out of the house and out from underfoot, but he didn't want Johnny to like it.

He didn't want Johnny to enjoy his freedom or to be able to go far. He wanted it to be a leash, to have an end so that when he pulled, when Sid needed a son for that perfect family portrait of smiling faces at the club or at a dinner, Johnny would come back, would be dragged and yanked back.

So he taught himself how to fix his Avanti, how to run tests, how to keep it running smoothly, how to change a tire, check the oil, to decipher what any lights meant, what sounds meant what.

His Avanti became an extension of himself, something he knew so well that he could tell when something was wrong and how to fix it. He'd go out of the Valley for parts, out of Sid's reach so that they couldn't be spoiled or corrupted or fake.

He borrowed his friends garages to fix his car. Setting up shop in Dutch's garage near all the antique classics and race cars, rolling under his Avanti to do repairs while Dutch sat nearby chatting about whatever, asking what he was doing fiddling with the radio to play Abba. Or at Jimmy's. They both had enough space that Johnny could roll into their garage and get to work without being in the way. He could pick some corner and work.

Jimmy always brought him drinks and snacks, watching what he did fascinated, asking how he knew what to do. Johnny couldn't fix other cars with the same ease, but he found comfort in knowing what to do, how to do it. He'd knew he could rely on himself. Self sufficient.

It's what he told Sid when Sid asked why he didn't trust a mechanic to do the work for him, why he didn't let a professional fix his Avanti, why he did such lowly dirty work. Johnny said it was good practice. That it saved money. Usually that Sid got. Begrudgingly let it go, focused on other ways to hurt Johnny that didn't include the Avanti.

But he still didn't like strangers touching his car, didn't like them wanting to look under the hood. He'd caught one of the mechanics Sid had paid off about to pour sugar into his tank and ever since he realized that he only trusted himself. And now Mr. Miyagi and Daniel. And that was it. No one else could touch the Avanti.

"It's a custom modified Avanti prototye and it's fine, I'm not here for it. I'm looking for Daniel LaRusso?" Johnny said holding up the bag with the bento in it.

"Oh."

The mechanic looked disappointed but led Johnny through the garage past several cars towards one with some familiar shoes sticking out from under them. Johnny hung back as the man tapped his shoe against Daniel's and Daniel pushed himself slowly out from under the car.

He looked a little pale, dirty from oil and grease.

"You got a delivery," the mechanic said hooking his thumb back to point at Johnny.

Johnny lifted the bag and Daniel got up, digging a cloth, a colorful bandana out of his overalls to wipe grease off his hands before shoving it back in his pockets. Daniel stepped towards him, a small smile starting to spread across his face, amused, curious.

"LaRusso! I thought you were going to be done with that car an hour ago?" A man yelled from the back of the shop.

Johnny’s gaze followed the sound of the voice, stepping towards Daniel, in front of Daniel, getting between them. He didn't like the man’s tone, his body language.

"Sorry sir, there's a-"

"I don't care what it is, you've got to be faster LaRusso. Customers don't like waiting."

Daniel patted Johnny's shoulder stepping around him towards the man, stumbling a little.

Johnny couldn't help himself, reaching out to feel Daniel's forehead. He was hot. Too hot to be in a garage dealing with heavy equipment.

"Daniel I think you've got a fever," Johnny whispered.

"I'm fine ," Daniel said trying to step out of reach, stumbling, turning paler than Johnny had ever seen. He reached out to grab hold of something and Johnny caught him, scooping him up.

"He's too sick to be working today," Johnny said.

"Him being sick is no concern to me, he needs to finish that car."

"I'm taking him home."

"And who do you think you are?"

"Doesn't matter, these are unsafe working conditions if you're making people work while they can barely stand. You're lucky you have any customers at all let alone that no one has gotten badly hurt."

"Listen here you, you can't just waltz in somewhere and tell someone how to run a business. It's none of your business."

"I'm making it my business. You're giving him the rest of the day off and possibly additional time until he recovers," Johnny said, arms tightening around Daniel, holding him close. His eyes were shut and he was breathing was off, his body was too warm. "And he's going home."

Johnny turned heading back towards the Avanti, glad he'd made more soup and rice at home. He'd put Daniel back in bed, check his temperature, make him some tea and-

"If he leaves this garage then he's fired."

Johnny stopped.

"He's not leaving of his own free will," Johnny said. "Think of it as if he's been dragged away. You can talk about his future later when he's conscious."

He didn't wait. He didn't listen. He hurried out of the garage hoping that Daniel would forgive him. He'd come back with someone to make sure they got Daniel's things, the Ford. But the most important thing was to get Daniel home.

He set the bento box in the back seat and then shifted Daniel in his arms to open the door.

"Where we goin'?" Daniel asked blinking up at him.

"Home," Johnny said.

"End of day already?"

"No, you're sick. Time to go home and sleep," Johnny said gently setting him in the seat.

"Gotta clock out."

"I talked to your boss."

"Oh."

"We'll talk about it when you're better and if I did wrong, I'm sorry. But you shouldn't be handling heavy machinery right now."

"Johnny, I'm fiinnnneeee," Daniel said pushing himself up. "Just took a teeny nap."

"You fainted," Johnny said, carefully trying to buckle Daniel in.

Daniel reached up and poked his cheek. "Didn't faint. Me? No, never. I'm fine."

Johnny stepped back and shut the door, leaning against the window, "Don't you want to go home with me? We'll spend the day in bed."

Daniel stared at him owlishly, big brown eyes studying Johnny's face. He turned, shifting slightly. "Promise?"

Johnny held out his hand, pinky extended. Daniel stared at it. Then back up at Johnny. Then back down and carefully, slowly reached out his hand, hooking his pinky around Johnny's.

Johnny set the bags he'd bought down on the counter and looked around the apartment. Daniel was still on the couch where he'd left him but he'd woken up. He was wrapped up in all the blankets and pouting.

Johnny set his keys aside and walked over, kneeling down next to him. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"You said we'd get to spend all day in bed."

"Soon."

"Where'd you go?"

"The store."

"For what?"

"I called your mom-"

"What? Why?"

"I wanted to know what you liked when you're sick. I got the food she recommended, and the medicine you like. She said you hate the cherry flavored stuff but like grape, so I tried to find that."

Daniel stared at him. "I'm not sick."

"Your fever begs to differ," Johnny said. "Now do you want to change into pajamas and go to bed or do you want to sit here and watch TV while I heat up soup and rice?"

Daniel frowned looking at the TV. "Fine. TV is fine. But I do want to spend most of the day in bed." His eyes flicked back to Johnny.

"Of course," Johnny said leaning down and kissing the top of his head. "Do you want some tea?"

Daniel sunk deeper into his blankets when Johnny pulled away. "Yes."

Johnny smiled watching the pile of blankets move as Daniel got comfortable, rolling over onto his side so he could better see the TV.

"What kind of tea do you want?"

"Peppermint."

Johnny set the remote to the TV back within Daniel's reach then returned to the kitchen. He filled the kettle up with water and set it on the stove and started putting away his shopping. All the things he'd gotten from Lucille's shopping list. When the kettle whistled he made the peppermint tea and headed over to the couch. Daniel had turned on the TV and was staring at the screen glassy-eyed.

Johnny leaned over to set the tea on the table and then kissed the top of his head again.

Daniel made a small sound. Not much of anything. Without any meaning. Just an acknowledgment.

"Tea's ready."

"Thanks."

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

Johnny started to turn but a tan arm shot out from the pile of blankets

and held his hand. He stopped and turned back. The pile was moving, shifting as Daniel slowly moved, pushing himself up. He patted the couch pulling on Johnny.

Johnny sat down and waited while Daniel took a sip of his tea and got comfortable, laying back down, head in Johnny's lap.

"Do you want a pillow? Is that comfortable?"

Daniel nodded, eyes on the TV, watch the day time soap opera he'd settled on. Johnny watched for a moment before letting his gaze fall back down to Daniel.

He looked tired. Which made sense. The apprenticeship had been more work then it should've been. It was in part for credits for school.

Johnny wondered if he'd fucked up. By essentially stealing Daniel away from his job. But he wouldn't have changed what he did. There was no way Daniel should've been working on cars if he could barely stand.

He gently ran his hand through Daniel's hair. They'd talk about it later. About how red the guy who owned the place had been. And how Johnny assumed it wasn't going to go well. But that was a problem for later. It wasn't like Daniel hadn't been working there already for over a year. It wasn't like he hadn't already put his hours in. He should've had enough credits. Or at least Johnny hoped he had.

It wasn’t like Daniel was doing it for the money. They paid him practically in peanuts. And they didn’t need the money anyway.

The shop was doing well and his mom kept sneaking money into his account. Johnny read the notes. Payment for ice cream. He hadn't bought her ice cream. He remembered calling and asking.

And she'd laughed and said, "No, I was thinking about ice cream so you should go get some. My treat."

That happened a lot. She'd think of something, something she wanted to do together but didn't want to bother him about and would just put money in his account for like 50 of them. Johnny had reminded her that ice cream didn't cost that much and she'd laughed and changed the subject.

After a while Daniel pushed himself up, a little unsteady, hand on Johnny's thigh and looked around blearily.

"You want your tea?" Johnny asked.

He nodded.

Johnny passed it to him and Daniel leaned against him, not quite laying down, not quiet sitting up, but most of his weight on Johnny. His blanket fell a bit and Johnny pulled it back up over his shoulders, wrapping his arm around Daniel's waist, keeping him up and pressed close.

"You'll let me know when you're hungry right?" Johnny asked softly.

Daniel nodded sipping at his tea.

"Are you still comfortable here or do you want to go to bed?"

Daniel looked in his tea thoughtfully then up at Johnny. "Bed."

His voice was so crackly. It sounded like it hurt.

Johnny hoped he didn't have strep throat or something like that. He tried to remember what that looked like. He could look later or call Lucille or his own mom. But rest was the key for now.

He nodded, carefully moving Daniel and his blanket, scooping him up in his arms and standing. He walked to the bedroom, pulling back the bedding and setting Daniel in the bed.

Daniel gripped his shirt, fist in the fabric holding him as he started to pull away.

"What can I do for you?" Johnny asked.

"Stay," Daniel said.

He had planned to go turn the TV off and come back but Daniel was holding on so tight. Like he didn't want to be left alone. Where did he think Johnny was going to go?

He wasn't going anywhere.

Not again.

He'd just left for a couple minutes to go get supplies. It hadn't even been an hour. But, it was fine. The TV wasn't too loud.

"Okay," Johnny said lifting the bedding up more and crawling in,

carefully over Daniel, he didn't know how to move because Daniel hadn't let go. At this point the only way to move was literally to lay on top of him. Which seemed ridiculous while Daniel was sick. Though maybe he could flip that.

He moved carefully, before rolling them over so that Daniel was laying on him, his head on Johnny's chest.

Daniel shifted slightly, letting go of Johnny's shirt and curling up at his side, with his head on Johnny and a leg over his, his arm wrapped around Johnny's ribs, holding on tight, almost crushingly tight.

Johnny ran his hand over Daniel's arm, down his side, along his back and Daniel sighed, a deep breath out of his open mouth and he shut his eyes. He was warm still, but not hot hot. Which meant his fever was going down a bit. He'd thought he'd read while Daniel slept, but there was no way to move without possibly waking him up. And Johnny didn't want to do that, so he just kept tracing lines and shapes along Daniels back and side.

After a while Johnny shut his eyes, listening to Daniel's soft breathing. How he'd stayed awake so long Johnny didn't know. But it was peaceful in their apartment. Even with the TV on in the distance. It was nice to take a break and just rest. Daniel needed it and maybe Johnny needed it too. He let his hand still, resting on Daniel's hip.

When Johnny woke up he was stiff and a little confused looking around the room wondering what time it was.

Daniel was still asleep, or Johnny thought he was, but it was dark in their room. His grip had loosened from his ribs and moved down to his hip.

Johnny felt Daniel move, peeling himself away from Johnny and pushing himself up, a little unsteadily.

"What time is it?"

"No clue."

"This isn't what I thought you meant."

"Hmm?"

"When you offered for us to spend all day in bed. I didn't expect to sleep all day," Daniel murmured.

"It's good for you."

"I'm sorry, I knew I wasn't feeling great but-"

"Don't apologize for being sick," Johnny said, pushing himself up. "Are you hungry?"

"A little, but-"

Daniel's hand found his shirt again, holding on to it tightly.

"You okay?"

"I woke up and you weren't here."

"You mean when I was at the store?"

"Yeah," Daniel said. "I didn't realize that. I hadn't realized I'd fallen asleep on the couch. I guess everything was mixed up, but I just woke up on the couch and that was weird because I don't sleep on the couch by myself, and you weren't home. I usually can hear you somewhere you know? Well not always, sometimes you're really quiet reading a book somewhere. But I'd had this really bad fever dream, and I kept looking for you in that dream and you'd run away, like you used to sometimes? Like in Okinawa where I turned around and you were just gone. We'd been shopping and having a good day and you just disappeared. Same in New York. And I was convinced that this time you actually left left. Did that thing you talked about. Took the Avanti and just headed out somewhere else far away. I thought I'd called out your name, but you didn't respond so I thought maybe the dream was real."

Johnny pulled Daniel into his lap, hugging him close.

"Daniel," Johnny whispered, head on top of his. "I'm sorry. I told you I was leaving, and you told me to bring you back hostess pudding pies. I was gone less than a half hour. I went to the place down the block with a shopping list from your mom because we hadn't really stocked our medicine cabinet right."

"What do you mean?"

"Well if you've got a cut, a broken bone, a gash, a wound or a

headache we're good. Get your hand stuck in a jar or something? We've got so much lube. But we didn't have anything your Mom said you like when you're sick. No cough syrup or stuff to help you breathe or heck we didn't have a thermometer that wasn't for candy or a turkey. I'd also planned to go to the store tonight, because we were out of bread, and like simple foodstuff. It's why I made like rice and soup, because we had the stuff for that. But not like toast."

"You got all that in less than an hour and walked it back?"

"You were singing when I left. But like in Italian. You almost never speak Italian. I didn't even know you knew it enough to know a whole song. I didn't want to leave you alone for long. But I wanted to get stuff so we could hunker down until you felt better. And I sure as hell wasn't going to drive to the store and leave you in the car."

Daniel's fist in his shirt hadn't lessened. It still held on tight. The dream must've done a number on him.

Johnny kissed the top of his head. Well, this was fine. Simple solution really.

He wrapped Daniel up in the blanket from the couch, the soft one and scooted towards the edge of the bed, lifting Daniel and taking him with him, out of the bedroom and out towards their living room/ kitchen. It was early in the evening. A sitcom was playing on the TV. Daniel wrapped his arms around Johnny's shoulders. Resting his head against Johnny's shoulder.

"Where'd you like to sit? Kitchen chair? Couch? I'm going to reheat the soup and rice I made for lunch that we didn't eat. I'm not going any further than that."

"Kitchen," Daniel said.

"Your normal chair okay?"

"Yeah."

Johnny pulled the chair out with his foot and then carefully set Daniel down in it.

"Do you want another tea? I don't think you finished the other. Or some water? I also got orange juice. Your mom said you like the pulp when you're sick?"

"Yeah. Uh, tea," Daniel said.

Johnny nodded refilling the kettle and turning on the stove as he got the soup and rice he'd made earlier. "Do you want some fish? We've got some still that's been sitting in the fridge. I already defrosted it."

"Okay."

It was weird, Johnny looked over. He expected Daniel to be half asleep at the table but despite the still sick look on his face, the tiredness and the glassiness his focus was intense and it was on Johnny. Tracking him across the kitchen.

He gathered the ingredients he'd set aside earlier with dinner in mind and went to work, rolling up his sleeves. The kettle whistled and he quickly took it off the heat, pouring hot water into a mug.

"Ginger? Peppermint? Chamomile? Sleepytime?" Johnny asked opening the cabinet.

"Peppermint."

Johnny nodded pulling the box out and setting about making the cup for Daniel. He set it down in front of him and Daniel reached out, holding his hand. Tight.

Johnny looked at the stove. The fish would be fine for a few minutes. He pulled out the chair next to Daniel and sat down taking Daniel's hand in his, loosening the grip and holding the one hand in both, gently massaging it with his thumbs.

"How's it going?" Johnny asked softly. "What's hurting?"

"Just tired."

Johnny nodded. "How's your throat?"

"Warm."

Johnny nodded. "I'll put batteries in the thermometer in a bit. I want to know if you've still got a fever. And then at some point I want to take a look at the back of your throat."

Daniel wrinkled his nose and gave him a look.

"Hey, your mom told me you got strep really bad as a kid. I want to make sure you didn't get that again."

"Doesn't feel like it."

"It could just be a bad cold or something," Johnny agreed. "But I want to be careful."

Daniel nodded, picking up his tea and taking a sip.

"I feel a bit better."

"Good, I'm glad. Let's eat then huh? I'm going to go get the fish, they should be done soon," Johnny said gently squeezing Daniel's hand letting go. He filled a bowl up with rice then paused looking at the fish.

"Do you want fish on your rice or separate?" he asked.

Usually Daniel liked the fish on top of his rice, eating it together so the sauce would mix, so he could eat spoonful's of rice and fish. But if he was sick maybe he'd rather have the rice by itself.

"Together," Daniel said.

Johnny nodded, carefully filling up the bowl of soup and carrying both over to Daniel, getting him chopsticks and a spoon. He then put his together and sat down next to him. He normally sat across from Daniel but here he could do what Daniel did when they went out to eat at tiny tables. He could hook his leg around Daniel's.

Daniel was holding his spoon over his fish and rice and Johnny watched a smile spread across his face. Felt Daniel’s other leg press against Johnny's.

They ate quietly for a moment, then Johnny remembered that Daniel probably shouldn't be the one talking with a sore throat, he should. So he told Daniel about calling Mr. Miyagi and how Mr. Miyagi and Sato brought the Ford over from the mechanics. He talked about the call he'd had with Dutch. He talked about the shop. He talked about all these little things, pieces of conversation he'd been storing up while Daniel had been wearing himself thin for that awful apprenticeship.

Daniel listened, watching him talk, eyes on his lips as he spoke.

It was slower to eat and talk, but there was no rush. Nowhere for either of them to be. And it was nice. Even if Daniel was sick, to just be. It'd been a while. When Daniel stopped eating Johnny gently took his hand.

"What can I get you now? What would you like? Anything you want to do?"

"I-" Daniel pulled his hand out of Johnny's covering his mouth as he sneezed.

Johnny passed him one of the boxes of tissues he'd bought earlier.

"Thanks," Daniel said after a while. "I bought you something,"

"Huh?"

"I was saving it for you birthday, but I think it's also a gift for me. So could you open it now?"

"Where is it?"

"Back of the hallway closet."

Johnny nodded.

He was a bit confused. His birthday was months off. But he opened the closet and flicked on the light looking in, wondering what Daniel got him that was also a gift for himself that sick him would want. That last part, sick him wanted it, knocked a lot of things off his assumed list.

It couldn't be dirty then. Or sex related.

Maybe a big sweater? Though that seemed silly.

He saw something odd. He reached in grabbing the black case and pulled it out.

"This it?" Johnny asked holding it up.

Daniel nodded.

Johnny turned off the closet light and shut the door walking back over to Daniel and setting it down on the table and taking his seat.

Daniel stared at it, then at Johnny.

"Open it."

Johnny did, flicking the latches. He looked down at the guitar then at Daniel. He picked it up carefully.

"I-"

Daniel pulled the blanket tightly around his shoulders and leaned towards Johnny, putting his hand on his knee. His face was serious.

"Anything that got destroyed. All of it. I'm going to get it for you. Even if you don't want it any more. Just in case. So that you can, try again if you want, so that journey doesn't end abruptly."

Johnny looked back down at the guitar. Everything that got destroyed. There were too many of those half gifts. A gift he'd asked for only for it to get taken away.

He felt his vision blur.

It'd always been made to seem like it was his fault. That these things had been left somewhere they shouldn't have been, that it was always an accident. Even though Johnny never had left anything out, always cleaned up after himself, always put everything away. Because even when he'd been little and believed that it was his home too he wanted to be neat and orderly so Sid would like him. So he'd be seen as good.

He'd believed it the first couple of times. That it'd been an accident. Then he learned that it wasn't. That it never had been.

He moved the guitar carefully in his hands, running his fingers over the strings. He listened carefully, making adjustments, tuning the guitar. It was one of those things he'd put in a box in the attic of his mind and gave up on. Just like about everything else. He hadn't expected to pick it up again. For Daniel to see the hints and hand it back to him.

That promise, it was overwhelming.

He knew Daniel meant it. Knew that that warm hand on his knee was waiting. Curious.

Johnny played. The calluses he'd built up when he used to play weren't quite the way they should've been, the strings stung a little, but he remembered all the notes to the songs he'd learned, he remembered how to play them. The way he'd been supposed to for his recital, but Sid had had an event, didn't want to go, didn't want his mom to go. And he was adamant that Johnny couldn't borrow someone else. Said he'd already called and canceled it.

Johnny was used to it at that point.

He played until his fingers hurt, which wasn't long. They weren't used to it any more. He looked up at Daniel and saw his eyes shinny, tears running down his cheeks.

Johnny quickly put the guitar back in it's case cupping the sides of Daniel's face.

"Hey, hey what's wrong?"

"You're good."

"I'm sure I'm very rusty, but thank you," Johnny said brushing away tears with his thumbs and kissing Daniel's forehead. "I'll play it or the sanshin whenever you want."

Daniel wrapped his arms around Johnny burying his head against his shoulder and Johnny smiled softly hugging him back, rubbing his back and holding him close.

After a while Johnny pulled away and Daniel quickly reached for the tissues again, blowing his nose.

"Mind if we check your temperature?"

Daniel groaned but nodded.

Johnny opened up the box, put some batteries in and then handed the ear thermometer to Daniel.

Daniel sighed, moving to lean against the table.

Johnny cleaned up, putting food away, refilling Daniel's tea and getting the phone. He'd promised Lucille he'd call and give her and update. There was a slight beep and Daniel looked down at the screen then flipped it to Johnny.

100°F

He still had a fever.

Well he hadn't taken any medicine yet.

He punched the numbers to Lucille’s in.

"Hello?"

"Hi Lucille," Johnny started.

Daniel stiffened. Pulling the blanket closer to himself.

"Hey how's Daniel doing?"

"We just checked his temperature, it's 100. We slept most of the afternoon, we've had dinner. It was fish, rice and miso soup. We've had tea. I haven't looked at his throat yet, but he hasn't said it hurt. He hasn't been coughing."

"Hmm you should give him something for his fever then."

"Do you want to talk to him?"

"Yes. Thank you Johnny."

Johnny looked at Daniel and held out the phone. "It's your mom."

"Hi Ma."

Johnny set about opening the medicine for the fever and getting a glass of water, listening to Daniel talk to his mom. Daniel got up carefully, pulling his blanket around himself and Johnny stopped, watching him to see where he was going to make sure he didn't fall over or trip over the blanket.

He was headed off towards the couch.

Johnny followed with the medicine as Daniel curled up on the couch picking up the remote and flipping through the channels before settling on something. He glanced up and took the medicine from Johnny and the water, taking it, still talking to his mom.

Johnny sat down next to him and Daniel moved, leaning against him.

"Thanks Ma, we'll call tomorrow," Daniel said. "Mmhmm, yup, love you too. Bye."

He held up the phone towards Johnny. Johnny heard Lucille say, "Bye Johnny."

"Bye Lucille," Johnny said taking up the phone and hanging it up, setting it aside and wrapping his arms around Daniel. "What else can I do for you?"

"Just stay right there," Daniel said leaning against him, patting his thigh and watching the TV.

They watched a couple TV shows until Daniel started yawning again. "Back to bed?" Johnny asked.

"I want to change, brush my teeth," Daniel said.

"Okay," Johnny said leaning forward to hook an arm under Daniel's legs.

Daniel swatted him.

"Let me walk will you?"

"Okay," Johnny said leaning back.

Daniel patted him, gathering up his blanket around him. He stood and waited.

Johnny picked up the phone, prepared to put it back on the holder, walking with Daniel back to the bedroom, turning off the TV and straightening up, just a little, on the way.

He headed towards the bed as Daniel got his clothes. He debated whether he should change the bedding now or later. After Daniel's fever fully went away?

He wondered if he should go in with Daniel.

He worried about the tile.

He felt eyes on him and turned.

"Are you going to shower tonight?"

"I didn't do much today so I think I'll wait," Johnny said with a shrug.

Daniel nodded setting his blanket back on the bed and heading off to the bathroom.

Johnny turned, getting everything he could think of set up on the beside tables. His library books that he'd been reading were sitting there next to the lamp, one of the tissue boxes, the thermometer, medicine, water.

He heard the click of the door and watched as Daniel made his way back to the bed crawling in and under the covers, sitting up and watching him. Johnny headed to the bathroom, he got ready quickly, worrying about leaving Daniel alone too long.

He hoped Daniel had fallen asleep again. He needed more rest. But when he opened the door again Daniel's gaze was on him. Like he'd been waiting.

"You need anything?" Johnny asked motioning to the bedside table of stuff. "Or tea? I can get one of those art books if you aren't tired yet and just want to look at something. Or some magazines."

He was used to Daniel watching him, having his eyes on him. But it was different. Like he was still worried about that dream. Like he was scared to blink and Johnny would just disappear.

"I like looking at you. You're my favorite piece of art to look at," Daniel patted the bed.

Johnny blushed and got in on his side of the bed. He moved in close wrapping his arms around Daniel.

"Your sick and still flirting?"

"Always gonna flirt with you."

He was quiet, sincere. The tone hadn't been implicitly flirty either. Johnny pressed a kiss to the side of Daniel's head. Daniel took one of Johnny's hands in his.

"Is this about the nightmare still?" Johnny asked softly.

“I read this book," Daniel said softly. "About people who disappeared. And I always thought, how could that happen? Like the pilot?"

"Amelia Earhart?" Johnny asked, not quite following, but Daniel was sick. So he’d be lucky if he could. He was just glad Daniel wasn’t stuck in Italian.

"Yeah. I mean it was bad enough when people died. But to not know because they disappeared ? And then I met you and you'd like planned out your own disappearance. And you could do it so easily. You'd be by my side one moment and then gone the next. In this apartment it's been even from my arms. I think if I hold onto you tight enough you won't go anywhere. But sometimes you still do. It's usually fine. But I worry, and sometimes I panic...and in my dream Silver was here."

"Here?" Johnny asked waving around the room. "In our apartment?"

"Yeah," Daniel said hugging Johnny's arm. "He talked to you, and I

couldn't find where in the apartment the two of you were but when I found him you'd left. He'd talked you into leaving. And it was just awful. It was safer if you weren't here. And...and I knew that was right, but I didn't want you to leave. And I didn't want to be alone. I woke up and you weren't there and it reminded me of the nights where you aren't there when I wake up. Like here. You're not still here with me. Instead you're out there. And I go and find you. I mean, it's silly right?

"To wake up and panic because you're not there but the light is coming in through the bottom of the door and you're on the other side making fried baloney or you're sleeping on the couch. And it's...unfounded...but I worry, did I do something wrong? I worry, before I realize you're on the other side of the door, that you've gone through with your plans to run away, or that you've gotten tired of me, or that you're hurt or something bad happened. And then when I find you I'm relieved but then I worry that you're upset with me. What was wrong with sleeping beside me? What woke you up?

"When I was at that conference last year I kept thinking about you. Not just because I missed you but...like a baby, if once you were out of my sight you'd disappear. Either taken away or you'd just leave without a word. I worried I'd call too often and it'd annoy you. I wanted to call you every morning and at work and at night. I missed you. No. I miss you. I...don't like being so far from you. I hate that that shop in Tarzana is so far. I hate the distance. I want to see you at school. I want to see you more than I do. I hate how rarely it feels like we have time. I hate how tired I am all the time. I just want to spend time with you. I...don't want to be abandoned again."

Johnny moved looking to see Daniel's face, his glassy eyes.

"I'm not going anywhere," Johnny said.

"I know that. I just...I worry that I'll wake up and everything will be gone."

Johnny studied him for a moment, wracking his brain trying to remember when everything was gone.

"After we got back from Okinawa?" he asked brushing a tear off of Daniel's cheek.

Daniel sniffed and nodded, moving to hug Johnny and to press his face against Johnny's shoulder. "We spent that whole trip worrying that Mr. Miyagi wouldn't make it, wouldn't come home with us. And I

was so relieved when we all got on that plane safe and sound. And then...it was like when I looked away from Ma she disappeared. I don't want to look away from you and turn around and you're gone. I mean I always find you but I'm worried about the time I won't."

Johnny wrapped his arms around Daniel holding him close, rubbing his back, thinking.

"I know you're your own person and can go do stuff," Daniel said.

Johnny could feel his fingers digging into Johnny's shirt, gripping it tightly.

"Daniel. I think when you feel better you should talk to your mom about the way she left. I'm sure it was chaos, but I think you'll feel better if you talk to her. Silver's in jail and he wouldn't be able to talk me into or out of anything. This apartment is specifically a no-Silver zone. Security knows to keep an eye out for him, Kreese, and Barnes and hell, my mom made me give them Sid's info too. They're all in jail.

“But I get the fear. You know I didn't use to sleep much right? I sleep best with you next to me, hugging me. But sometimes I still have nightmares. Not much. It’s gotten better here. Or I just wake up and feel like I need to move. I don't want to wake you up. You're so busy with work that I didn't want to disturb you. I didn't realize it was stressing you out by letting you wake up alone.

“Do you want me to wake you up? Just be like, I'm going to go move around a bit and try to sleep on the couch ? Want me to like stick the whale shark in your arms if I've gotten up to sleep in the living room or to get a snack or to the bathroom or something? Like I'll only do that if I'm somewhere else in the apartment? Let's figure something out. I don't want you waking up in a panic. I just haven't wanted to bother you. But...would it be okay for me to come visit you on campus? I know you were looking forward to being someone new there, but would that be okay? We could get lunch together or we could carpool."

Daniel sniffed and nodded. His head felt warm against Johnny's shoulder.

"I thought we were doing a good job communicating but I think we made assumptions again," Johnny said with a soft sigh.

He shifted and Daniel pulled away rubbing his eyes. Johnny handed

him the tissue box.

"I want you to bother me," Daniel said taking the box, turning and curling up against him. "Bother me all the time."

He was so used to being alone. To relying on himself. Of making sure he wasn't in the way or bothering anyone. There was a lot of things ingrained, a lot of things he was working on and that one he hadn't even noticed. He was still acting like he was going it alone. He wasn't. Daniel was there. He had someone who wanted him around. A lot. He hadn't wanted to be overbearing or clingy. He hadn't wanted to scare Daniel off.

He'd spent most of his life going places and having no one to tell. He hadn't wanted to bother his mom, and then Sid didn't want to know, didn't care, didn't want to know anything about him. He diddn't get phone calls because he'd had no friends, and then because Sid didn't like hearing the phone ringing for anyone but himself.

Johnny gently brushed hair from Daniel's forehead. "You know, when we went to the mountains with the guys?"

"Yeah?" Daniel sniffed.

"And how the guys called home and you called your ma?"

Daniel smiled softly. "Yeah."

"If we did that now, the family I'd call would be you."

"I wanna kiss you."

"Your nose is running."

"Gross," Daniel complained taking another tissue. "Why is being sick so gross?"

Johnny kissed the top of his head. "Comes with the territory."

"When you were sick," Daniel began, looking and squinting at the trash can and throwing his tissue towards it, missing and letting out a groan.

"It's fine."

"At this rate I'm going to get you sick."

"Probably. But with luck it won't be until you get better, and then I'll have the hottest nurse to heal me."

"I had a point."

"Take your time finding it."

Daniel huffed then sneezed and sighed leaning his head back against Johnny, looking up at him. "When you were sick, you'd look for me a lot. Why? Was it the same thing? We're you scared I'd disappear?"

"Oh, uh I wasn't getting much sleep. And I wasn't sure if you were really there or if I was dreaming."

"You're red! Why are you red?"

"I dreamt about you a lot."

"Dirty dreams?"

"...."

"They were! How long were you having dirty dreams about me? What did we do in these dreams? How long did you have them? Oh my god is that why you wouldn't leave me alone when I moved to LA? Was Ali just an excuse?"

Daniel looked so excited, the glassy teary-eyed look was gone and he looked so focused.

Johnny looked away. It was embarrassing. He could remember that first one. It's stunned him, haunted him.

"I was in my room at the mansion listening to music, and you came in and you sat on my bed. We weren't really friends yet, you'd just been by the mansion a couple of times. I thought you wanted to fight, you were mad or something, but you pinned me down and kissed me."

"I can do that more if you liked it," Daniel said. "Or I can get stuff. Ali told me there's this shop downtown that sells stuff."

"Stuff?" Johnny repeated with a frown.

"Sex stuff."

"We have sex stuff."

Johnny was pretty sure they had more lube and condoms then any active couple needed.

"Toys, I bet they'd have handcuffs. I could get the soft kind so it wouldn't hurt your wrists."

"Wait a second-"

"What other dreams about me did you have? What else did I do after that?"

"I woke myself up."

Daniel pouted.

"That's no fun. Next time you run into dream me stick around, don't run away from me and report back what we do."

"The point was that because I was sick I was checking that you were you and not the dream version," Johnny sighed leaning his head back against the bed frame.

"I had one," Daniel said. "Actually quite a few."

"Huh?"

"Dreams."

Daniel closed his eyes. "Mmm lets see. I had one when I was training for the All-Valley, remember when you pinned me up against the lockers at school?"

"Yeah, sorry about that."

"Well you did that spin kick afterwards and were all huffy. I followed you in my dream and said that you were wrong, you liked me and you were scared of it and I managed to pin you against the lockers and I was right. But I tried to forget that one because I was still dating Ali."

"I'm noticing a trend."

"Hmm?" Daniel opened an eye looking up at him, sinking down and resting his head on Johnny's thigh. "Oh, you wanting me to pin you down and me wanting to pin you down? That's why you might like the handcuffs. Or maybe a nice tie? Oh or a hachimaki. Could tie your wrists together gently and then see where it goes from there. Well. Sex. It'd go to sex. Want to make sure that's clear."

"Aren't you tired?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah."

"Then go to sleep, I'm not going anywhere, just...sleep."

"Not even a little sex?"

"You're sick. You'd probably faint."

Daniel frowned, patting Johnny's thigh. "What if I just touch you ? "

"No, you need to sleep and get better soon. You've still got a fever."

"I was so excited when you said we could spend all day in bed."

"What did you think we were going to do?"

"Lots of sex."

"You could barely stand."

"Well I mean I didn't realize I was sick sick. I thought maybe I just hadn't gotten enough sleep. I figured a blow job was doable, or you could ride me. That's what got me home."

"That's what got you home. Not me carrying you or driving you home."

Daniel patted his thigh again. "Mmm yup. Your very strong, very tough, very good."

Johnny frowned poking Daniel's cheek. "Go to sleep."

"Will you ride me later? I like watching you enjoying yourself. Going bounce bounce bounce."

Daniel peaked an eye open looking up at Johnny with a grin. "So red. Pretty. Okay, that's also a good image. I'll see you in my dreams. Good night Johnny," Daniel said kissing Johnny's thigh and shutting his eyes again.

Johnny leaned his head against the headboard again, breathing carefully. Deep calming breaths.

Daniel stirred again after a few minutes.

"Can't sleep?" Johnny asked.

"Will you read to me?" Daniel asked.

"Any requests?"

"No," Daniel said.

Johnny grabbed one of the books off the beside stand. One he hadn't started yet and flipped to the first page.

" In a distant and second-hand set of dimensions, in an astral plane that was never meant to fly, the curling star-mists waver and part..."

Johnny woke up to light coming through the windows and looked at his watch. Morning. Daniel was pressed in close, warm breath steadily breathed out against his neck. He reached over with the back of his hand and felt Daniel's forehead.

He wasn't hot any more. No longer burning up.

Somewhere along the way he assumed he needed to give Daniel enough space to grow and flourish. To put down sturdy roots. He hadn't thought about the way Daniel always called home, called him , while he was out. If he was at a bar or something he called to check in on Johnny and spent, arguably too long on the phone talking to him and not enjoying his evening. Like even though they lived together, even though they saw a normal amount of each other Daniel missed him.

He knew that, on some level that Daniel missed him. Johnny missed Daniel. It'd been hard when Daniel had decided to leave the shop. How he'd look up when the door chimes rattled hoping it was Daniel, inevitably disappointed every time. Straining without meaning to to hear his footsteps. Looking off towards the counter and the phone, expecting Daniel to be there like he had been at the start. The way he'd forgotten for several months straight that without Daniel he needed to answer the phone. That it was now his job to do that. That Daniel wasn't there to talk to customers for him and Mr. Miyagi.

It was exhausting.

But he'd told himself it was okay because Daniel was going to be happy and would finally get to be his own person without him.

Without them leaning on one another. That was normal. Healthy.

But he'd forgotten something so simple. They were best friends. Not just lovers. Not just friends. They were, their own family. And it made sense that they missed each other. Johnny was so used to not talking to people. Not telling them where he was going, what he was up to.

The guys, they'd been pissed when he missed calls. They'd hammered that in to him. Those calls while he was in Okinawa. And he now made sure he never missed a call. That he listened to their updates, tried to organize his own, no matter how mundane because they were family.

He hadn't realized that Daniel needed that too. Wanted him by his side as much as possible. They were still learning. They were still healing. But rather than needing the space, something they both assumed the other needed, they needed touch. He'd stupidly been touch starving himself without meaning to. And it'd effected Daniel. Culminating in awful fever dreams.

Johnny had been learning how to speak up again.

He'd been taught that his opinion didn't matter. To just listen and smile and nod. To not question anything because everyone else knew better and if he was upset he just buried it. And Daniel always tugged at him, trying to get his opinion, to speak up. And it was getting better. He complained, he talked, he just had assumed some things were too selfish.

Like this. Like wanting to just lay in bed with Daniel. Because he worried about Mr. Miyagi and the shop. Because he worried about Daniel and his responsibilities. But Daniel didn't get sick often. Not like this and his worry trumped everything else. And it was shocking how easily everything fell into place.

How help rose up for Mr. Miyagi. How easy it was to just to ask for help and receive it. He'd almost cried when Mr. Miyagi had said it was fine that he had help he could use to keep the shop going. That if Johnny needed help to just call. That he'd gotten so many calls as news spread that Daniel was sick that he hadn't left when he'd planned to. It wasn't just that they were worried about Daniel. But that they wanted to help. To help him and Daniel.

It was stunning. The realization that he wasn't alone. That he hadn't noticed. He thought he had to handle everything on his own, and it was just a cold. He was pretty sure it was just a bad cold. But he had

everyone's notes. Tricks and tips. Recipes he could use that would be good. He'd called and talked to Lucille for an hour. Then it seemed Mr. Miyagi had talked to others. And they began to call. His own mom. The guys. Yukie and Mr. Miyagi. Hell Chozen had offered to bring dinner, something he ate whenever he was sick.

It was just a cold. Something he could've handled on his own. But, he didn't have to. And even if it was just the two of them in their apartment. He realized it wasn't just them. He'd listened to messages on the machine while cooking. Abuela had called and left a message. Her recommendations. What had worked with her kids. Her grandkids. She'd spoken slowly in Spanish, slow enough that Johnny had understood, taking notes.

His mother had told him, "It's not just me and you. And it might take you a while to realize it fully. To see the whole implications of it. But believe me, I've seen it and it's awe-inspiring. I think you won't fully see it until you get married, when I make you invite all these people and see when they show up to celebrate you and your happiness, but you'll see it someday."

And he wasn't married and he might not ever get to...he pushed that feeling down. The point was, he thought he got it. He wasn't alone. He had Daniel, he had his friends, he had his family. Because that's what they were. Maybe not related by blood, but by bonds. Because they showed up when they could. It wasn't just him showing up when they needed him. It was what they'd been trying to tell him all along. What Daniel had quietly been whispering to him all along. That he didn't have to be alone.

He didn't have to pretend things were okay when they weren't. That it wasn't just big things. It wasn't just when bad things happened that they banded together. That it was small things too. Dumb things. Good things. And maybe he'd known on some level but had been too scared to test it and see that it was a mirage. Something he dreamed about but it actually was solid. Solid enough for him to lean against if he needed to.

Maybe, Johnny thought looking at Daniel, mouth open and sleeping still, hair messy, but holding on tightly, he hadn't realized it either. That it wasn't just him. That no one was going anywhere. Well. Not quite. That they went where they were going but they were only a phone call away. All of them.

Daniel had been through a lot too. He was used to things just

disappearing out of his grasp, things not being in his control. He wanted stability, that grounding and support just as much as Johnny. He'd made a bad assumption. That Daniel wanted to be alone, to have time alone, and he'd pulled away, not wanting to suffocate him, not wanting to be too much, not wanting to overwhelm or possibly scare Daniel off. And instead he'd just made it worse.

Talk. They'd have to talk about it. He'd have to ask.

Daniel eyes squinted open and Johnny ruffled his hair.

"Good morning. How are you feeling?"

"Ugh."

"Yeah? Mind checking your temperature for me?"

Daniel pouted but held out his hand.

Johnny reached over and got the thermometer and handed it to him. Daniel stared at the screen after a while and handed it to Johnny letting his head sink back onto Johnny's chest.

98.5°F

Back to normal.

"Fever's gone."

"Mmm," Daniel murmured, hugging Johnny.

Johnny wanted to get out of bed. He needed to move. He'd been inside most of the day before, had slept most of the afternoon and evening. Had slept through the night. He hadn't thought too much sleep was a thing. But he needed to stretch or something. Kata?

Even if he caught what Daniel had later, right now he needed movement. Maybe he could pick Daniel up and just walk around the apartment? Daniel probably wouldn't like that and would get bored before Johnny did.

Right. Ask.

"Hey Daniel?" Johnny said.

"Mmm?"

"I gotta move. Somehow. I can carry you around the apartment if you want."

Daniel let out a laugh, pushing himself up and looking at Johnny. "If you carry me around everywhere how will I know that I'm feeling well enough to move?"

"You'll test it eventually," Johnny said, sitting up.

He felt stiff. He rolled his shoulders.

"So, am I carrying you around?"

"No. You go do what you're going to do. I'm going that way," Daniel said pointing towards the bathroom.

Johnny nodded. He waited until Daniel had taken a few steps and seemed steady before getting ready for the day. He started the coffee pot for himself and the kettle on the stove for Daniel. He set out mugs and then picked a spot in the living room he liked and worked through his usual work routine.

Part of it was left over from Cobra Kai. Part of it he'd adjusted from living at Mr. Miyagi's to fit into their apartment or while he had the time. Sometimes when there weren't customers he worked out at the shop, other times it was before work or after dinner.

"Damn," Daniel said voice gravely from his cold.

Johnny glanced over at him pausing in his set. Daniel had flopped down on the couch and was watching him.

"Are you hungry? What do you want for breakfast? Toast? Oatmeal? Okayu?"

"You know how to make Okayu?" Daniel asked.

"Yukie gave me the instructions yesterday," Johnny said moving onto the next set.

Daniel was quiet, processing the information.

"You called Yukie for me?" Daniel asked softly.

"She called me for you," Johnny clarified.

Johnny heard a rustle of paper. All his notes that he'd set over there to

go through. From everyone who'd called. Things from Lucille, the stuff Daniel liked, the stuff he didn't. His own moms reminders, stuff from the guys, from Abuela, recipes and recommended things to try. The offer from Chozen.

Johnny glanced over. He heard a sniff. He stood up and walked over. Leaning over the back of the couch.

"I had to fight to be the one to take care of you," Johnny said.

Daniel looked up at him, eyes glassy with unshed tears.

"It's just a cold."

"Yeah," Johnny said. "I know."

The kettle whistled and Johnny kissed the top of Daniel's head before going to make his tea and his own coffee. He returned passing Daniel his tea.

"Did you really?" Daniel asked.

"Hmm?" Johnny asked taking a sip of his coffee as Daniel kicked his legs onto Johnny's lap.

"Fight to to take care of me?"

"Yeah, your mom offered to come over. Then my mom offered to come over. Yukie also offered. I wanted to do it," Johnny said, then frowned into his coffee turning to Daniel. "was that okay?"

Daniel's face was a little pink and he nodded.

"I realized, when everyone called, sort of belatedly, like after they'd called and after you fell asleep, maybe something obvious. And," He looked at the bonsai sitting on the shelf. "I don't know maybe it's weird, like maybe it's like stupidly obvious."

"Johnny."

"Right, but I realized, I'm not alone. You're not alone. We're not alone," Johnny said turning to him.

"You ever do a trust fall?" Daniel asked.

"Huh?"

"In like school or like camp or something?"

"I did, at camp."

"With Judy?" Johnny asked amused.

"Yes, same camp," Daniel said. "We were supposed to catch one another right? And like we were young so the importance of it didn't settle in right? So like everyone thought it was funny to just not catch the other person. Our councilors got frustrated and we ended up moving on. But I think, for me anyway, I kind of didn't trust that anyone was there you know?" He coughed and Johnny took his tea until it subsided.

"Yeah," Johnny said. "I never trusted anyone would catch me after a while."

"I will though," Daniel said grabbing his hand.

Johnny smiled rubbing his thumb over Daniel's knuckles.

"I know. You catch me an embarrassing amount."

"That's because I'm too hot and you get distracted too easily by my hotness," Daniel said with a grin before coughing.

"That is exactly it. How dare you be so hot," Johnny said with a laugh. "You know, though, I've got you too. I just. I'm sorry for disappearing on you in the past. I didn't want to, suffocate you, like a vine or something."

"I will tell you if it becomes too much, promise. I will speak up. But you haven't even gotten close. But you'll tell me if I'm...too...clingy?"

Johnny smiled softly, leaning forward and kissing the top of Daniel's head.

"I'm gonna fight whoever made you think that was even possible."

Daniel looked at him surprised.

"Hey, I thought we agreed no fighting."

"Did we?" Johnny asked innocently.

"We did! You're banned from fighting!"

"Me? What did I do? Why is it mostly me?"

"Because people pick fights with you for no reason."

"They pick fights with you for no reason too!"

"No, not no reason. Dumb reasons! People pick fights with you over nothing but posturing."

"Isn't it the same thing?"

"No! The people who start fights with me try to utterly destroy me. The people who fight you are just dicks. There's a subtle difference."

"You know a lot of dicks?" Johnny asked.

Daniel had been preparing a spiel, that animated spark in his eyes as he was about to lecture on the subtle difference in their fights and enemies and Johnny watched with a grin as it deflated immediately like a punctured balloon.

"Intimately?" Daniel asked, tone innocent, tapping his finger against his mug.

Like this was a serious question, a serious swerve in the conversation.

"Yeah."

"Two."

"Two?"

"I mean I'd say I know mine pretty well and yours at this point. Wouldn't you agree?"

Johnny should've known it was a trap. That as soon as Daniel had got enough sleep, as soon as his fever had abated he couldn't win. That that smile made his brain think of things, things Daniel did with his mouth, with his tongue, and those fingers. Johnny looked away feeling his skin burn.

"You're thinking about it aren't you?" Daniel asked with a soft laugh.

"Just tell me what you want for breakfast huh?" Johnny said.

"I supposed," Daniel said thoughtfully. "I may have been all work and no play for a little too long." He pulled Johnny's hand up to his lips.

"I'll play with you soon, promise."

"Breakfast," Johnny repeated.

"Fine, you're right, food first. Oatmeal."

"Brown sugar?"

"Yes please."

Johnny carefully removed Daniel's legs from his lap and got up making instant oatmeal and getting out brown sugar.

"Do you want anything else?" Johnny called, turning and blinking because Daniel had moved to the kitchen table. "Sorry, didn't realize you'd moved. Wouldn't you be more comfortable on the couch?"

"But the view is better here," Daniel said with a grin looking at him over his tea.

"Is it?" Johnny asked looking around.

Oh.

Him?

He blinked looking back at Daniel who grinned and winked at him.

"Your sick and your still flirting."

"Can't stop, won't stop. It's my favorite pastime."

" Favorite huh?"

"Wait, no, top ten for sure."

Johnny laughed softly setting the oatmeal down and the brown sugar in front of Daniel. "We've got juice, you want your pulpy orange juice?"

"Yes please," Daniel said softly.

Johnny poured it setting it in front of him, sitting down with his own bowl of oatmeal and his coffee.

"You must be feeling a bit better."

"Yeah, a bit."

Johnny took a bite of his oatmeal and then frowned. "So we gotta talk about something."

"Uh oh. What'd I say?"

"Huh? No. I need you to know what happened yesterday."

"What'd I do?"

"Why do you think-no, your boss sucks. And I pretty much just walked in and carried you out and you might've...I tried to argue with him, but he might fire you. Which is complete bullshit, you shouldn't have had to work in the first place while you were sick. He should've taken one look at you and sent you home. But uh, yeah." Johnny had been angrily gesturing at the air with his spoon and then sunk it back into the bowl of oatmeal. "Sorry. I think I made things bad, but I couldn't think of an alternative. Your health is priority."

"Shit," Daniel said leaning back in his chair.

Johnny swallowed hard. "I-you've worked there, as an apprentice, for like nearly 2 years now? Don't you...don't you know everything you need to know? Everything you could learn there?"

Daniel sighed, running his hand through his hair, pushing it back from his face. "Yeah, but you gotta like work your way up."

"Do you?" Johnny asked carefully.

This was a conversation he'd been wanting to have but hadn't know the right way to go about it. Watching Daniel stress out over work had been unpleasant. The way it weighed heavy on him, exhausted him when he got home.

"Johnny," Daniel said softly, tiredly.

"You're learning business at school right? You're going to graduate. But like what do you want to do? Actually? How can that bastard help you get there?"

Daniel studied Johnny's face for a while.

"I like cars," Daniel started.

Johnny nodded, eating his oatmeal.

"The car Ma drove out here, man it sucked. It was falling a part, we

had to push and run and jump in to get it started and it was embarrassing. And then Mr. Miyagi had all these nice cars right? He gave me my dream car. Just gave it to me. And it was weird, having this nice well loved car and to drive it but Ma's been driving this awful car she had to push and jump into. And I think, I want people to be able to get the car of their dreams or like a nice working car. You know? I want a place that does repairs but also sells cars, and I want to figure out how to do it so it's affordable. Because it's not like we can get around on public transit. The system here is a joke. Nothing like New York."

"So why do you need to apprentice still?"

"Well traditionally-"

"Are you learning anything from him anymore? Is it for the credits still?" Johnny asked.

Daniel blinked. "No."

"Okay, so this isn't something I'm great at remembering. I mean I still buy the cheap shit, but Daniel...we have money."

"Huh?"

Johnny motioned to their apartment.

"If like it's not enough, we don't have to live here. We can downsize you know? But the shop's doing decent and someone refused to pay me in kisses and I barely spend any-"

"No!" Daniel said quickly.

Johnny stared at him, waiting.

"I can't have you empty your savings for me again," Daniel said into his own oatmeal.

"It's not though. It's an investment. On you, our future."

"That's too much Johnny."

"It really isn't. We can call the guys and that real estate lady and you can get the ball rolling."

Daniel sniffed and Johnny looked at him closer, at his bowed head, he was crying? Why was he crying?

"Daniel?" Johnny asked softly.

"Why? Why do you believe in me so much? What if I fuck up? What if it's a flop? What if I can't do it?"

Sometimes Daniel could cry in a way Johnny found heartbreaking stunning, but sick Daniel was a mess.

Johnny pushed the box of tissues over and Daniel blew his nose. Rubbing at his eyes with the back of his arm.

"Because you're fucking badass," Johnny said. "Like annoyingly so. Everything you do. Karate? Mastered in in months under duress. Model one time? Fan club. The first time you made a soufflé? Fucking amazing. First business? Made Mr. Miyagi's damn dreams come true and it's flourishing. I'd be an idiot not to bet on you. And I'm not an idiot so I'm all in. Worse case scenario? We move in with our Moms for a bit."

"No!" Daniel whined. "No way, if we move in with our moms we move in together with your mom."

"What's wrong with your own mom?"

"Nothing. But I already did that, for like 18 years. And your mom filled your bathroom, of a home she knew you'd probably not live in, with condoms and lube."

"You want to move in with me to my mom's home because she's a sex positive mom? Isn't your mom also-?"

"I feel like my mom doesn't know boundaries that well. She's...like the rest of my family. Barging in. We could actually have sex at your mom's place."

Johnny shook his head. "That was your whole concern? Only thing standing in your way of your dreams?" Johnny asked.

"No," Daniel said, blowing his nose again.

He took a bite of his oatmeal thoughtfully. Then looked up at Johnny.

"You really think I could do it?"

"Hell yeah."

"It'd be a bigger thing. Not just you and Mr. Miyagi. I'd...I'd have to

hire other people. I'd be in charge of their livelihoods. I'd hold people's futures in my hands." He looked at his hands, the faded scars, he looked at his palms then up at Johnny wide eyed. "I can't-"

"Let's start small," Johnny said putting his hands in Daniel's. "A simple question. Is there anything else you could learn from the guy you work for?"

"No," Daniel said softly.

"Then quit. We will be fine. Just go to school. Dream big. Plan. I'm not recommending you run out right now and take this all on. Just one step at a time. Quit, heal up, catch up with your homework and focus on school. You don't need to be grinding yourself down under another fucking bastard."

"He's not the same," Daniel said quietly.

"You deserve better," Johnny said flatly.

"Oh, the no arguing tone, don't hear that too often," Daniel said with a small smile.

"I don't like him or the way he treated you."

"Well I appreciate you not fighting him."

"I had my hands full. Couldn't have even if I wanted to. And I did," Johnny said.

"Thanks," Daniel said squeezing his hands. He glanced up at Johnny, curious, "What would you have done if I did have more I needed to learn from him?"

"Would've apologized and either helped you get back in his good graces or helped you find a new one, preferably the latter."

Daniel smiled softly. "I'm going to try, no promises. We may have to move in with your mom."

"That's our emergency plan huh? You're not changing your mind?"

"Nope, in case of emergency we move in with Laura. Actually that could be kind of fun."

"Hold on now, let's not start packing yet," Johnny said.

"You're right." Daniel said sagely. "One step at a time. Get better, make love to you on nice clean sheets, hand in my notice, take you out to a nice dinner and then tempt getting in trouble in the back of the Ford or Avanti your choice, go to classes and figure out what I gotta do to open my own shop. Open the shop, get a nice desk, break in that new desk with you on it."

"I think there were some strange things mixed in there on your list," Johnny said blushing.

"We'd be knocking some of those off the list if I was feeling better," Daniel said.

"I think that's a lie," Johnny said.

"How so? You want to try? I got no promises. I'm definitely down, but you'd for sure get sick and I might not make it long," Daniel asked drinking his juice.

"I think you have written some things on your list in permanent marker and somethings in pencil. The pencil things can be crossed off, but the permanent marker, that's just a constant."

"Ah like how Mr. Miyagi wrote that one shopping list in permanent marker?"

"Yeah, because we always need more soil. But we don't always need more like invoices and stationary stuff."

"I like the way you think. Yeah, sex is permanent. Always on the to do list. You. Top of my to do list, every single time. No matter the list. Shopping list. Reminder, buy a desk that Johnny would look nice laying on."

"That's not how you should pick out a desk," Johnny murmured feeling his skin burning.

"It'll be a factor," Daniel said grinning. "I mean it's got to be sturdy enough you know?"

"I thought you were sick? Was it all a ploy?"

"Nope, still sick," Daniel said coughing.

" Sure , suspicious timing," Johnny said finishing his coffee. "Well, before you start planning your future, while you're still in phase one

get well soon, what do you want to do? Back to bed? Want me to serenade you? Want to play cards? Watch TV? I think we've got a puzzle around here somewhere."

Daniel laughed, coughing, "No, I want to shower. I feel disgusting."

Johnny nodded, picking up Daniel's empty bowl with his own and taking it to the sink. He paused, halfway through rinsing them off and turned to Daniel. "Want company?"

"Always."

Johnny loaded the dishwasher, cleaning up from breakfast then followed Daniel towards the bathroom. He turned on the water, waiting for it to warm up. Arms wrapped around Johnny's waist and a head rested on his back.

"Has this been too much?" Johnny asked. "Do you need to lay down again? Or sit down?"

"No," Daniel said softly. "Just, glad you're here."

"Happy to be here," Johnny said.

"I kind of wish we had a bath."

"Next place," Johnny said patting his arm.

"House."

"Woah, your skipping to a house next? What about the business?"

"Next we live with your mom until the business is great, then we move into a house."

"I feel like maybe there should be a few more apartments in there first huh? Are we not even going to try downsizing first?"

"I've gotten use to a very specific lifestyle," Daniel said. "I can't go backwards."

"Oh really? What's the parts of this lifestyle you can't give up?"

"You," Daniel said. "On our nice bed and our fancy sheets."

"Listen even if we're downgrading apartments we're not selling all our stuff," Johnny said.

"We're not?"

"I mean if we run out of space it goes into storage."

"Storage costs money."

"Mom's got storage and Jimmy's been adamant we use one of the rooms at his place still."

"That feels bad though. Just hold our stuff for an unspecified amount of time."

"What I've realized from you being sick," Johnny said carefully tugging at his shirt.

Daniel let go, letting him take it of. Johnny set it in the laundry basket they'd moved into the bathroom.

"Our friends, our family, want to help us with the easiest things. You know those cartoons that make a big deal about being nice to people and how it creates community or whatever? And then that community shows up when you need it without you asking?"

Daniel nodded.

"That's our friends and family. We show up for them and we, or well I, don't really give them many opportunities to return the favor you know? To express that love with action. So it's like they're itching to be helpful over a cold. Because, they got our backs," Johnny put his hand on Daniel's shoulder. "We're not alone. You are not alone. I used that when it was something big and the way they came together was amazing, and it's like they're antsy that there's no big issue. So we gotta let them do their thing. We gotta ask for help."

Daniel sighed. "But it's so dumb,"

"It's not. It's not dumb at all. It's a dream. And if it pans out great, if not, well we tried."

Daniel nodded and Johnny put the rest of his clothes in the basket before stepping into the shower. It felt nice, the perfect warmth, almost scalding. He listened as Daniel's clothes went into the basket and as he took a couple wet sounding foot steps into the water.

"You sure you're okay with this?" Johnny asked turning.

Daniel was hugging himself, but also chewing on his lip, eyes clearly

having been on Johnny's ass. He shouldn't have even been surprised any more.

He reached out and pulled Daniel in, into the warmth of the shower and Daniel plastered himself close, hugging Johnny. Johnny could work with this. Plus, and he'd never tell Daniel, this felt safer than letting Daniel shower on his own. At least hanging on like a little koala bear was better then the worry Johnny would've felt if he'd been in there on his own, worrying he'd overdone it and fainted and knocked himself out.

He liked it. Liked Daniel leaning against him, wanting to be close to him. He liked helping him and he liked the comfort of it all. He grabbed Daniel's shampoo and went to work carefully massaging it into Daniel's damp hair.

Daniel murmured something into Johnny's chest and Johnny stopped moving his hands.

"Huh?"

"You're going to put me right back to sleep," Daniel murmured, looking up at him.

"That's not a bad thing," Johnny said.

"I don't want to waste all day sleeping."

"It's what you're supposed to do when you're sick."

"But I'm home, you're home, we've decided we've got nowhere else we need to go or want to be," Daniel said shifting his stance a little, sliding his leg pointedly between Johnny's.

"Daniel," Johnny said trying to muster some sort of admonishment, trying to sound disapproving but it came off more embarrassing.

Still. No excuse. Daniel was sick.

Daniel glanced up at him, pouting, eyes in that big doe eyed look that made Johnny cave nearly every time he used them on him.

"What?" Johnny asked.

"It's unfair."

"What's unfair?"

His only weapon was to play dumb. Eventually Daniel's brain and exhaustion would kick in and he'd realize what a bad idea it was.

Right?

He would realize it was a terrible idea to get either of them riled up.

What if Daniel fainted? Again.

This was a bad idea. He'd messed up. He'd forgotten something. Daniel liked making his point. Daniel liked explaining himself. He liked it a little too much. Johnny realized his folly when Daniel ran his hand down Johnny’s chest and between his legs.

"You're here. I want to touch, everything."

"We agreed the shower was an awful place to do this."

"Not the time I tried to pick you up again ," Daniel complained.

"If that will get through to you then yes, yes the time you tried to pick me up."

Daniel pouted looking away from Johnny, "I know better. I know not to attempt it in the shower."

"Are you sure?"

"But I can still touch you, that's not dangerous."

"But your sick."

Daniel laughed. "I don't think just moving my arm a bit is going to exhaust me." Then he looked thoughtfully up at Johnny a grin spreading across his face. "I mean if I do get tired then you can just do it yourself and I'll watch."

He was a monster. An insatiable monster. But his hand felt good. Shit. He was supposed to be doing something else. He was supposed to be, he looked at his hands, still entangled in Daniel's hair, still sudsy. Idiot. They were both damn idiots. Daniel was going to get soap in his eyes and it'd serve him right. Damn it.

"Stop," Johnny said.

Daniel's hand stilled. He looked up at Johnny brow furrowed. And Johnny knew why. He was clearly interested in Daniel's hand.

"Your hair," Johnny said.

Daniel stared at him and Johnny gently pushed him back, coaxing his head back under the stream of water.

Focus. Focus. Don't do something stupid. Lots of stupid decisions were made in this shower. Don't add to them. He should've known. Daniel had like Pavlovian responses to certain spaces. The shower was one of them. Their cars was another. The way Daniel always wanted to jump his bones in either the Ford or the Avanti made almost any trip hard.

He ran his fingers through Daniel's hair, rinsing out the soap until he was sure there was none left. He was so stiff. Willing himself not to move, barely trusting himself to breathe until it was done.

That would've been awful. Terrible. He relaxed. Daniel laughed, smiling up at him. Then he he started coughing but he was still smiling.

"What?"

"Your such a sap."

"Huh?"

"I love you."

Johnny smiled kissing the top of his head. "I love you too."

"Can I go back to what I was doing?" Daniel asked.

"Yes," Johnny said. "Please."

Daniel pressed his forehead against Johnny's chest, looking down at what he was doing. Maybe he had his own Pavlovian responses. Maybe he thought he was sturdy and strong but he was like Achilles. One super easy kind of stupid weakness. And he didn't know what it was exactly, he didn't know where it was. But Daniel did. And Daniel was very good at just knocking the breath out of him.

Johnny moved his hands, reaching for Daniel. They needed to move. To another state. Where there wasn't a water issue. Or they needed a tub. Though- No. They'd just dirty the water. There was no winning. Or maybe, maybe there was. Maybe it was a win no matter what. Because it was Daniel.

He'd think about it later. About the water problem. When he could

think and when he didn't have to steady himself with his hand on the tile because Daniel looked so damn focused, focused on him and he didn't want to have his knees buckle and send them tumbling because Daniel managed to always make him weak in the knees.

That was probably karma.

Chapter End Notes

The Avanti used in the film was a prototype. Avanti didn't attempt to create a convertible to sell to the public until 1984, among which would have been Johnny's Avanti. All of the cars Avanti produced that year had to be recalled because the paint refused to adhere to the body of the car and the company went bankrupt. It wasn't until a few years later when they came back under new management that convertibles were actually sold. (And they eventually went bankrupt again and again). So I went with the prototype from the film rather than the harsh reality that sometime around the end of the 1984 tournament Johnny's car's beautiful red crumbled to dust. This took a lot of research and if anyone is curious I've got like so many different things on it, so maybe I'll make a tumblr post eventually or something.

100F is 37.78 C
98.5F is 36.94C

The quote "In a distant and second-hand set of dimensions, in an astral plane that was never meant to fly, the curling star-mists waver and part..." is from the first book in the Discworld series by Terry Pratchett. "The Color of Magic" came out in 1983

Built on the Ashes

Chapter Notes

Part of this chapter is Johnny's POV, part is Daniel's

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"It's okay," Chozen said as Johnny stood on the corner of Lankershim and Magnolia not moving despite saying he was going to go in.

He'd thought it'd be easy. But his palms were clammy and he felt sick. The outside was completely different. He could already tell it was different. That Chozen had put so much effort in. Just like everyone had said.

"You don't have to go in," Chozen said by his side, wearing his gi.

His eyes were on Johnny, concerned.

He felt like Oreo, the rabbit, an escape artist that everyone knew would bolt if given the chance.

He took a deep breath. He wasn't Oreo. No one needed to bribe him with snacks to stay.

He was past that.

He was no longer going to bound over and past people, out of their grip when they just wanted him to stay, unaware that he was welcome and cared for and loved.

He was working on it.

He was waking up Daniel when he woke up if he was going out of sight, telling him where he was going. He was calling his mom more often over little things, over nothing. Just to talk.

One step forward.

He'd face it.

He could do that.

He put his hand on the door and then looked down at the handle. It'd been swapped out. He paused staring at it. He wouldn't have noticed

but it felt different. Every small detail had been thought out hadn't it?

If he'd noticed, would Daniel?

If he'd done it he wouldn't have bothered to swap out the door handle. He wouldn't have thought about it.

He pushed the door open. There was a wooden sound, wooden chimes just like the shop.

Everything was different even though the space was the same. It was like when he'd taken the neighbor kid home when they'd lived at the apartment and they'd invited him in for a cup of coffee. It was the same layout as his and Daniel's place but it'd been so vastly different.

It was Cobra Kai but it wasn't.

It wasn't the same place he'd stopped outside to watch, where he gained the courage to go inside and pay for lessons. Taking himself because Sid wouldn't and his mother was too busy with all the stuff Sid wanted her to do.

He remembered feeling adult all of a sudden, taking himself to classes to learn something, delivering checks to Kreese, standing tall in his gi amongst all the older kids, watching them spar.

It'd been magic, because Kreese could make him like that. He could learn how to be strong and powerful and stop people from hurting him. He wouldn't cry any more, he'd transform into something, someone else, and someone would look at him with pride and shower him in praise.

There were pictures on the walls.

Copies of the ones from Okinawa, of Miyagi Shimpo with a plaque on it, a long line of sensei's all the way to Sato and Mr. Miyagi. And then Chozen.

It was darker, the walls weren't white anymore but blue.

Johnny toed out of his shoes, setting them carefully on the shoe rack.

How many times had they, in a rush, just left their shoes in a pile at the door? How many times had the end of the lesson led to him, bruised and sore, slowly trying to find his shoes amongst the pile?

This was smarter, easier.

A section for kids and adults, different heights.

There was a spot for them to hang up their coats, umbrellas sitting in a bin just in case. Not that it rained much in LA. But the thought was shocking.

The mats were different as he stepped into the room. The feel was different, and not just because it'd been so long, Chozen had swapped them out. The scrolls were on the walls from the dojo, there were weapons on the walls but done so securely that a kid or stranger couldn't just grab them off the wall.

Mr. Miyagi had shown Johnny how to set that up, what felt like ages ago when they rebuilt in Okinawa after the storm.

On one wall was a painted bonsai. He walked over to it, hearing Chozen follow. It was his bonsai. No matter how he looked at it.

"That's my bonsai," Johnny said turning to Chozen.

Chozen nodded, putting his hand on the wall next to the mural.

"Cobra Kai was yours. The root of it, but you gave it to me to take and change and make into something new. The bonsai is Mr. Miyagi's logo, made by Mrs. Miyagi. Same, but different. You changed, the logo changed, the building changed. I hope you don't mind. I wanted to keep a reminder of you here, because I wouldn't be here if not for you. You brought change out in me, you're something that's growing and flourishing despite the past. Something I hope for myself."

"And the fish?" Johnny asked softly.

"Miyagi sensei's favorites. I wanted to bring him here too, a part of him anyway," Chozen said.

There were mirrors on one of the walls and posters on another.

He remembered Chozen asking how he felt about his picture being in the dojo and he said he didn't care.

Daniel had said the same.

There was a photo of him and the guys from when they'd joined Cobra Kai. The gi didn't have the snake logo on the front so you had no way of telling. It'd been clipped so it was just them. Not the other kids.

They looked happy. It felt like a life time ago. They were photos from

his tournaments, from Daniel's tournaments. A photo of the two of them facing off. Johnny in his Cobra Kai black, the tournament gi he wore that he remembered being so proud to receive, so honored. And the gi Daniel had been unsure how to put on, struggling in the locker room.

He wished he'd helped him. That would've been good sportsmanship. Instead they'd been mean about it. He regretted that. The memory tasted sour on his tongue and burned, like so much of those six months did where he'd been a bully, been mean, taken out all his frustration and anger on Daniel.

But Daniel shone in the picture. Wearing white, preparing that crane kick, despite his injury. It was so quintessentially Daniel. He didn't give up, he didn't back down, he got back up and he faced whatever he didn't want to do or didn't want to face. He was a badass.

There was a photo of Chozen and Sato standing out front on opening day. Photos of their old dojo with their old students in Okinawa. Photos of Daniel and Mr. Miyagi. Photos of Chozen and Miyagi sensei. And then there was a photo of Kumiko. Next to it was a plaque.

Dance classes offered as intensive camps during winter.

There was a poster from Kumiko's show on the wall. Posters for the All Valley and other tournaments. Posters from Okinawa.

"Do you want to see the rest?" Chozen asked.

Johnny nodded following him to the back office. How many times had he stood in that room, head held high, shoulders squared as cigar smoke curled around him while Kreese spoke in a way that led Johnny to believe he cared?

There were no army photos on the wall. No accolades from Kreese's time in military service. Instead there was a bookcase full of books on technique and history. Books on Okinawa and LA, books on art, and fiction.

Johnny studied the shelves, carefully grabbing one and seeing diagrams of how to use the weapons on the walls out front.

"Everyone learns differently," Chozen said.

There was a closet that was open, hanging on the hooks was a familiar leather jacket, traditional clothing, a couple gi's. A package sat on a

shelf of colorful belts and white gi's stacked by size.

The desk was different, nicer then Kreese's had been. There was a filing cabinet and photos on his desk. Chozen was smiling at the camera standing with Ali, Jessica and Kumiko, he stood in the middle and they were all in close, dressed up and smiling, arms around him. Another photo with the guys. Chozen was frowning but it didn't reach his eyes. There were postcards from South Korea, Tokyo and Ohio. One that Johnny had sent from Newark. A pair of Shiisa sat on the bookshelf.

"How are classes going?"

"We've got a decent group. We started with military since that's the contract. Uncle is opening up a location in Reseda next. I think he wants to be closer to the shop. I guess the students we have talked and the feedback was they mostly want their kids in classes. But the kids are doing okay. Balance is awful. Keep falling over. They get mad about it. Had to do a whole long week of meditation and breathing just to better direct anger. I recognize it now though. I know the signs and how to divert it. I didn't know that before," Chozen said picking up one of the shiisa. "Kids started a few weeks ago. Never really taught kids before. They're...kind of cute. Loud, full of energy but they're learning. I didn't think I'd be so grateful to Yuna. Yuna and her gang."

Johnny laughed softly. "She's a good kid. What'd she teach you?"

"How to handle a large group of children that hate me."

"I don't think Yuna hates you."

"She just likes to make my life difficult," Chozen said with a sigh putting the shiisa down.

He frowned, thinking then turned to Johnny.

"I did some remodeling."

"You did?"

"There was a space for an apartment. It's done. I moved in."

"Why didn't you say so? We should've thrown you a housewarming."

Chozen smiled softly. "I didn't want you to feel obligated to come

here."

"Did Sato and them at least throw you a housewarming party?"

"Yes, they did. You wanna see?" Chozen asked.

"Yeah, I never saw it before," Johnny said.

"I was thinking...do you miss it?" Chozen asked following Johnny out of the office towards the door, turning off lights and locking up as they went.

"What do you mean?"

"Karate....Dutch and Tommy mentioned you...used to practice at Mr. Miyagi's. But after the last tournament, after Daniel defeated, I don't even remember the guys name, but...now that Yukie-san and Uncle live with Mr. Miyagi, after we all moved in… you lost that space. Is it okay?"

Johnny put his shoes back on taking one more look at the dojo.

Did he miss it?

Did he miss Kreese ruffling his hair and telling him he'd done a great job? It wasn't common but he thought it had to be how it'd felt a father had to be like. That warm hand guiding him through life. Stern but caring, not mean or cruel like Sid. Dispensing kindness sparingly.

He'd found friends within those walls. He'd learned how to fight, an offense with no defense except more offense. He gained confidence and stopped running. It might have come crashing down around him. He might've gotten hurt more than a regular dojo would've allowed. He definitely overdid it.

But he had enjoyed learning karate with his friends. He'd enjoyed going out with them afterwards, like an eternal summer vacation just for them.

He missed it. He missed the excitement that led him to race his bike to class, to seeing his friends who smiled at him, calling out his name. No one else had done that. Excitedly waited for him. Looked forward to seeing him. Or it hadn't felt like it.

He'd grown so much with them under Kreese's guidance. Even if it'd been hell, even bruised, he'd held on tight just to hear those voices

call out his name, for those arms to wrap around him to talk about nothing and to feel like he belonged.

It was like the place was full of ghosts, ghosts of his past, of himself.

He stepped out and sighed. He had liked doing karate, karate with Daniel had been...fun. He liked practicing with Mr. Miyagi. He liked learning defense and new things. He liked sparring with Dutch while he did his taekwondo.

He liked learning and he missed it.

He missed getting on the mat and going through the motions. He liked the way Daniel got all fired up about it, determined to win against him, the way he threw his all into it when he was having fun. He liked going through the motions.

"Yeah, I guess I do," Johnny said following Chozen into an apartment.

He wasn't sure what he expected, taking off his shoes at the entrance.

It was plain.

Plainer than Johnny expected.

There was a bonsai Johnny remembered Mr. Miyagi giving Chozen one of the times he came to the shop with a Help not feel alone . Which had left Chozen so speechless that he stood rooted in the spot holding it. Johnny hadn't understood it in the moment, but now it made sense.

There was a couch, a small table with two chairs that looked like they folded next to a kitchen and a few doors that were shut.

"It's not much," Chozen said.

"You've been busy," Johnny said. There was a familiar owl figurine sitting on the counter. "Did my mom come here?"

"Yeah, she helped me pick out some stuff. She gave me that. Do you want some tea or something? I also have sake," Chozen said going to the kitchen.

"Tea please."

There was a painting of a man on a boat on the wall.

"This is nice?"

"You think so?" Chozen asked.

"Yeah, what's it of? Is it from Okinawa?"

"Kind of."

"Kind of?" Johnny asked turning.

Chozen had set a tea pot on the stove.

"It's Miyagi sensei."

"Did you paint it?"

Chozen looked up startled. "What?"

Johnny turned back to the painting. "The style is similar to the bonsai mural in the dojo. I know you painted that one. This is your work. It's beautiful Chozen. He'd love it I'm sure."

Johnny glanced back, Chozen's face was a little flushed. Surprised, embarrassed.

"You do have a talent for art. You should enjoy it more, indulge in your hobbies."

"Thank you," Chozen said removing a tin from the cabinet and setting it down on the counter, measuring out tea leaves. "I miss him."

"I bet," Johnny said walking to the kitchen space. "I'm sorry for your loss Chozen and I'm sorry we probably didn't help with your mourning process."

"You...weren't at fault. I...was very mad."

"It's a part of grief."

Chozen nodded. "Still, I regret hurting you."

"I'm tougher than I look."

Chozen laughed.

"No. You look tough but are soft on the inside. Not a bad thing. But you..."

Chozen looked away thoughtfully.

"Bare great pain with no complaint yet feel and carry every strike. You need gentler care. A softer world. Kindness."

Johnny frowned, unsure of how to respond.

"I learn a lot from you. That toughest shells hide great pain. I learn I hide myself and my own pain. And...it's not good. Festered. Like a rotten wound. Miyagi sensei passing, caused it to rupture. So much anger. Uncle forgave me, Mr. Miyagi forgave me, the people around me understood when I didn't. Daniel maybe did not trust me or maybe will never fully forgive me, but I accept. I accept his feelings of distrust and now I focus on forgiving myself. Teaching kids is helping."

The kettle whistled and Chozen took it off the stove preparing the tea and pushing a cup towards Johnny.

"Which is why I think you should join me."

"Join you?"

"You still haven't forgiven yourself, despite Daniel forgiving you. You are holding onto yourself so tightly. Same as when you take every blow with no complaint. Yet you remember every blow. You also remember every hit you gave. It's good for practice, to learn and grow as a fighter for tournaments, but bad for self when you replay over and over again in head. You are stuck on that ride with horses."

"Carousel?"

"That one. You are trapped atop a horse remembering everything. Growing yes with care. But still stuck. I know. It's hard. In dojo you see past even though I took away every thing that was. There was some good there, but it sits wrongly with you now, right?"

"Yeah," Johnny said looking down at his cup of tea. "I met the guys there and for a while, Kreese was nice."

"The world's not black and white, not good and evil. There is bad, and there are bad people and there is good and there are good people. But the majority of the world is neither, or rather, a combination of both. We are gray. Maybe if Daniel never came to LA you never lose final match, Kreese never turn on you. But then you never think about how he taught, or the unnecessary pain in your learning.

“If Daniel never came to Okinawa maybe Yuna-san not live today. I not make fool of myself, but Yuna-san would be gone, shortly after Miyagi-sensei. It is too much for small village. If there isn’t Daniel then maybe neither of us grow or change. Neither of us have to face ourselves and take a closer look. If no Daniel, then we wouldn't meet. Yukie-san, Mr. Miyagi, and Sato never reunited. As painful as growing is, reflecting, I'm grateful for it. Grateful to Daniel, grateful to Mr. Miyagi, and grateful to you.

“One day I think you will get up off the carousel and walk where you want to go. One day you’ll forgive yourself. It will take time. But I think, teaching helps. Working with students helps you re-see yourself. You see what they do, how they learn and you see yourself. They are themselves, of course, but sometimes you see parts of them that remind you of yourself. Like a mirror. And when you watch them grow, and learn and become their own maybe, you too will see you can grow and be free too," Chozen said hand gently resting atop Johnny's. "Think about it. Dojo always open for you. If you want to practice, if you want to spar, if you want to just come to be, or if you want to put on a gi and be called sensei. I'd be honored to have you teach with me."

Sensei? Him? Johnny wanted to laugh. It was a joke right? But Chozen's face was serious. He meant it.

"Let me think about it," Johnny said taking a sip of his tea.

"Of course, take your time. It's a big responsibility and takes a lot of energy, but you would be great at it. You're good with kids."

Chozen very slowly pulled his hand away, like he didn't want to and turned pulling something off the fridge, out from under a novelty Hollywood magnet. He turned back.

"This is for you."

Johnny took it carefully.

"For you and Daniel, letter from Yuna and other kids."

"Thank you," Johnny said.

"I translated it," Chozen said. "Why it's open."

"Well it says it was sent to you, so of course it's open," Johnny said carefully pulling out the letter.

There were little doodles, Daniel would love those. They still had several from the last letters. Chozen had carefully translated the letters in pencil next to the dark inky scrawl.

Johnny smiled. "Thanks Chozen."

"You're welcome Johnny."

They sat for a bit longer drinking tea in comfortable silence.

They put their stuff at Jimmy's. Furniture they'd bought, things that wouldn't fit, things Daniel knew they'd need eventually or he wasn't ready to part with. He felt like he'd lost. Like there was this stingy burn of defeat as he packed up their apartment.

He was trying to keep upbeat. Johnny was going to live with his mom. That room she'd done up with him in mind, full of clothes and books and things, with a spa style bathroom and a beautiful garden. He was going to live there. And it was good. It was good for Johnny to go home and get a second chance at living with family.

Daniel just felt a little bruised. Like he'd banged into something walking too fast and misjudging how close he was. It ate away at him, worrying that he was imposing on their second chance. Johnny moving back home was a delight for Laura. But Daniel wondered if maybe he should live with his mom. But he didn't want to give up everything.

He didn't want to give up waking up next to Johnny, feeling his heart beating steadily. He liked waking up first and watching Johnny sleep peacefully by his side, curled up and content. He liked living in those small moments where nothing seemed a rush or a hurry and the world could consist of just the two of them.

And yeah, maybe he didn't want to have to figure out how to get away with having sex in his mother's apartment. Laura already had filled the bathroom with condoms, making it easy to just grab something to try and see if Johnny liked it. And maybe he wanted a turn at having sex with Johnny in Johnny's bed, since they'd had sex in Daniel’s bed several times. Many times. And he wanted to do it in Johnny's room.

It wasn't the same. But it was nice. And there was a tub and Daniel

liked the idea of joining Johnny in the bath after long days. Though it was probably too small of a bath, the kind where their limbs would get all tangled up and getting out would be a puzzle. But he still liked it.

It took a while to settle in. Not nearly as long as he feared but it was a big adjustment. Not having to go to his apprenticeship, just focusing on school. The sudden burst of free time was overwhelming. So he started scrapbooking. He'd gone through their trips. Outings with the guys, senior year stuff, the New York field trip, prom and graduation all went into one and that was done.

Okinawa was also done. Now he was switching back and forth between two scrapbooks. One from their autumn trip to Seoul and Tokyo and the other their summer road trip to Ohio.

They were vastly different. The summer road trip had been long . He and Johnny had left after work and Daniel had had to fight with his ex-boss to get the time off. Had to bribe coworkers at the garage with souvenirs to cover for him while he was gone.

The original plan was Las Vegas but the hotels were too expensive and half the ones he'd tried to call had turned him down because he wasn't 21 yet. So they'd gone camping a couple times along the way. First at Lake Mead, Nevada.

Daniel had decided if he wasn't willing to spend a ton on fancy hotels then at the very least they'd stay at some parks and enjoy the scenery. He also wanted a repeat of their first camping trip, to have sex under the stars and in their tent.

He wanted to see if they could both fit in the same sleeping bag, if it'd be possible to have sex in one.

Challenges. He just wanted some silly challenges.

Daniel had stared at the Avanti the morning they left and then at the Ford. He wasn't sure which one to pick. He wasn't sure which one Johnny would pick. He loved the Avanti, but the Ford....well the Ford was his baby. He knew the Ford. He could drive the Ford and trusted it would get him where he needed to go easily. The Avanti was an unknown. He'd driven it once. And while it purred he didn't know if he trusted it on the long open road. Plus Johnny was less likely to give up control in the Avanti. And they had to share this fair and square. Otherwise they'd be miserable.

He put his things in the Ford.

He'd treat it like dibs. First one down, first one got to pick the car. Hell, he'd drive over to the elevator. He quickly dug the keys out of his pocket and hurried to the Ford. He knew Johnny loved the Avanti, loved driving, but the Avanti would be fine for...a few weeks sitting in the garage.

The Ford was a beauty, it'd handle like a dream, it begged for the open road. Plus they'd never lose it in a parking lot. The top could go down so really it was like taking the Avanti. Truly.

Daniel turned down the radio and danced his fingers across the steering wheel pulling away from his parking spot. He went over his mental checklist as he checked the mirrors. Bags with clothes for driving, comfortable shoes for driving, clothes including nice clothes if they went dancing in his suitcase. Camping gear. The tent, the one sleeping bag and blankets so he could say Oops only packed one we'll have to share, but blankets in case it was truly miserable.

He had no clue what Johnny had packed. He'd tried to tell him they should share a suitcase, that there was plenty of room in Daniel's suitcase for Johnny's things too. One suitcase would make getting in and out of the motels and hotels so much faster. Less to lug around and keep track of when they stayed at the parks. Plus it wasn't like their clothes were strangers, co-mingling together on their little dates in the washer and dryer. But Johnny had his own suitcase.

Daniel had been about to explain that his parents had this big old suitcase that they just threw all their stuff in together. Ma's stuff and his dad's stuff in one big suitcase. He liked that.

But he'd stopped before he explained, before he pointed out how much space there was in his own suitcase for them to share when he saw Johnny dig out his suitcase from the closet. The one that his mom had gotten him. How different it was from Daniel's.

It made him remember that little short story from English class. What was it? Baby shoes for sale never worn or something like that?

Johnny went on trips sure. Over night trips or short ones to the mountains with the guys, he had a gym bag that he kept well stocked for sleeping on the beach or overnight escapes wherever they may lead.

He packed so carefully, so thoughtfully that Daniel left him to it. To

go remind Louie to behave while staying with Ma.

Johnny's first trip. One he chose that was long and he finally got to see more outside of California. Not some emergency trip to Okinawa where he just grabbed that gym bag out of the back of the car and left in his graduation suit having not slept. An actual trip.

The excitement was palpable and so sweet that Daniel had just told Louie he got something in his eye and told him to pack up his own things before Ma got there because whatever was left behind was stuck in that apartment until they got back.

Daniel's suitcase was old, beaten up but it worked, it got him through a lot. Most importantly the trip from Newark to LA. And Johnny's was in pristine condition. He'd mentioned it when they'd moved into the apartment. His mom got it for him when he was little, after she'd married Sid. Thought it was cute to get a matching one with hers so that on trips it'd be easy to find their stuff. Sid already had his own, of course.

And it went unsaid that those trips never happened and that that suitcase just ended up, unused in the back of his closet for a long time. Until...well their trip to Ohio.

How many more little things were going to pop up like that? Little firsts that Daniel took for granted that Johnny never got to have? It was bittersweet. He loved that these firsts were with him, that he got to add them to the list, like the guitar. Slowly fulfilling promises that had been broken so long ago, piecing them back together.

It was a good trip. But he remembered sitting in the Ford, idling, waiting for Johnny to get off the elevator.

“Hey handsome need a ride?”

The way Johnny pulled his suitcase, getting familiar with it. He wondered why Johnny hadn’t broken it out for Newark. The icy sidewalks? The snow? It didn’t matter but he liked the way Johnny had walked up to him leaning against the window of the Ford.

“That depends, where you headin’?”

“Buckeye state. Ohio.”

Johnny had stepped back thoughtful. Like he was contemplating whether that way matched with his plans or not.

“Can we stop in Chicago along the way?”

“Chicago?” Daniel asked with a groan. Like that was the worst question he’d ever been given. He sighed, leaning towards Johnny, looking him up and down and clicked his tongue. “For a babe like you? I suppose I could stop in Chicago.”

Johnny had smiled, leaned closer. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

He’d leaned in, kissing him and then pulled away right when Daniel thought it was getting good. When he thought maybe they could do something quick and fun before they left. But then Johnny was putting his suitcase in the trunk and then joining him in the passenger seat.

“Are we listening to Springsteen the entire way?” Johnny asked.

“You can change it when you drive,” Daniel said.

He'd packed books from the library, guides on places. He was ready with fun facts like Okinawa. Weird little tidbits for their trip. Lake Mead was the first national recreation area in the USA and home to several endangered species including a frog that was believed to only exist there.

Daniel had hoped to see it and they did spend a lot of time near the water looking, getting soaked through, laughing like little boys as they tried to catch frogs and fell in the mud. Johnny kissing him against the bank, hands all over him. They had sex in the grass which tickled Daniel’s skin.

But it’d been nice to just let go, to let Johnny take over, to feel him everywhere, to watch those muscles work, glistening from being in the river.

He did however, get a ton of bug bites. Which Johnny apologized for, digging out a first aid kit and applying cream to Daniel’s back. Daniel had just teased him about it.

“You take me to the nicest places Johnny Lawrence.”

“What even bit you?”

“The only thing that should be biting me is you.”

“So you want me to go try and find a whole bunch of bugs and murder them for biting you?”

“No, I’m sure they weren’t expecting to find us blocking their path or interrupting their day.”

“I offered to go back and get a blanket or something.”

“I know.”

“And the spot you originally picked was overgrown with poison ivy.”

“Is that what that fancy footwork was?” Daniel asked with a laugh.

He remembered going to lay down and Johnny pulling him back to him, spinning like he suddenly wanted to dance. Like he wasn’t done playing.

“Itchy either way,” Daniel said with a sigh.

He’d rolled onto his stomach after his shower and Johnny had covered him in medicine. It was nice. His hands had the right amount of callouses that it felt good. It’d all felt good and he’d wanted to just bask in the moment, despite the bugs that’d bit him, enjoying their time together.

The sunset had been gorgeous and Daniel had gotten a good picture of Johnny looking at it, fresh from a park shower after they'd had dinner. Mr. Miyagi had sent them with onigiri which they'd eaten for dinner and Daniel had wondered if any moment could be so perfect.

After Lake Mead Daniel had tried to drive. But Johnny was stubborn that they share. Possibly still feeling guilty over all the bug bites that Daniel reminded him wasn’t his fault. It was a nearly 9 hour drive from Lake Mead to their next camping spot in the Black Canyon of Gunnison National Park. And Daniel spent a good chunk of it trying to rile Johnny up, flat out talking dirty and palming at him while he drove, offering to duck down and take care of what was bothering him.

Johnny relented only because they ended up on a long stretch of road where no one was around. And when they got to their camp ground and set up the tent Johnny had pulled Daniel into the tent and returned the favor.

He'd picked a remote campsite with that in mind and Johnny had pointed out the juniper trees and pinyon pines along they way. They didn't see much but it was beautiful. Not just the view of the park but Johnny sleeping naked beside him, hair mussed up from writhing

under him. They both had fit in the sleeping bag and Johnny hadn't complained about how close Daniel was, that unlike in bed he couldn't escape.

He had good pictures of the both of them at the parks, around the campsites. He'd asked countless hikers to take pictures of them at all the popular spots and they'd turned out well.

They then moved onto civilization, which was needed since their last campsite hadn't had showers. A motel in Denver with kitschy decor five hours later found them showering together because why not?

"Are all we going to do on this trip is have sex?" Johnny had asked after they'd broke into a fit of laughter because the bed squeaked something awful but it was kind of fun.

"You said you'd make going to Chicago worth my while," Daniel had said rolling off of him and pulling Johnny close.

It was what Daniel had had in mind. To do the great American pastime of driving across the country on a road trip and to have sex along the way. Mostly because Louie was still stubbornly there. Refusing to talk, going to the dojo and helping out with Mr. Miyagi's shop but not calling home and avoiding talking about home with Daniel. He needed to get it out of his system, celebrate the freedom from responsibility.

But they'd actually had a decent drive time so there was time to do things. They went to the Denver Art Museum enjoying views of the Rocky Mountains in the distance. They walked around downtown, they had Bison steak at a fancy looking restaurant for dinner that someone at the museum recommended and Daniel stocked up on souvenirs for his coworkers.

Daniel drove after that, seven hours from Denver to Lincoln Nebraska, guiding a half asleep Johnny to the passenger seat of the Ford, managing to get a good picture of him sleeping around six am as the sun was rising.

He hadn't told Johnny why they were leaving at the crack of dawn, but he did rouse Johnny in time to eat breakfast at a road side dinner and watch him try to wake up over his cup of coffee and pancakes. It was adorable and Daniel hadn't shown Johnny that picture yet.

The goal had been to get to the hotel, check-in and then go to the Sunken Gardens. A non-rushed enjoyment, unlike the museum that

they'd sped-walked through the day before.

Daniel wanted Johnny to point out flowers and tell Daniel what they were. He wanted to enjoy the fresh air and a nice walk. And it'd been lovely. Johnny had been delighted and watching him look at flowers and to walk along the ponds and look at the waterfalls made it worth it.

There were a few tulips leftover from spring still in bloom and Daniel felt all the stress just sort of melt away. He didn't have to worry about classes or his apprenticeship. Everything with LA was miles away, states away. It was just him and Johnny on a road trip. Just the two of them falling into bed. No Louie. No guys. Nothing.

And it'd been wonderful. Wonderful to have sex in new places and laugh over the different sounds old mattress springs made or weird decor choices. It was nice to be able to just drive off the road and go visit something they saw a big billboard for. To do all the road trip touristy things they wanted.

The drive to Chicago they split. Daniel started, letting Johnny sleep. They flirted when Johnny woke up, and it took very little hinting to get the favor from before returned once they hit open and empty road. Daniel had to grip the steering wheel super tight to remain focused and to keep his eyes open and on the road because he wanted to look down, he wanted to see Johnny leaning over his lap, blonde head bobbing. It really was a dumb idea and unsafe but it'd been a fun thing to mark off his list. Car blow jobs while driving, done, and hopefully that desire was done and gone.

He hoped.

He wasn’t sure.

Because when he had glancing down at Johnny at work in his lap…it did a lot for him. Maybe parked.

Parked was safer for next time.

Johnny was adamant about driving the rest of the way to O’hare, getting out to get the guys while Daniel took over and waited from the driver’s seat mentally preparing himself for the end of their sex filled trip. It wouldn’t be over over , they still had rooms to themselves, but the alone was over. He thought he got why couples did trips away, why honeymoons were a thing.

But it was good to see the guys. To have them in the Ford and wonder for a moment if he'd ever had them in his car before. Another first.

They'd booked a hotel downtown and Daniel had parked in the garage before they'd headed off to get pizza. Bobby had brought snacks, Jimmy talked about his classes and Jenny, Tommy asked them about the drive and it'd just been nice. Nice to see them.

The pizza had been ridiculous. An actual pie rather than a pizza. And it took forever, a good 40 minutes or longer before it came out to their table. A monstrosity Daniel had said. Too thick. No one needed a pizza like that. But he had enjoyed it.

Pizza pie was more of what it was, the dumb deep dish. And it'd been nice to eat it with the guys, catching up. They walked around the parks and downtown, the guys dragging them to the Magnificent Mile for shopping that was out of Daniel's price range.

Chicago made Daniel a little homesick. He missed Jersey while he was there, the hustle and bustle, the sounds of the trains. LA didn't have trains in the same way, not the same level of public transportation. There was something comforting about the sound of it in the distance, the sounds of a normal city.

They walked down to the lakefront at the end of the night, watching summer fireworks before walking back to the hotel for the night. He had good pictures of all of them, together leaning against statues, eating pizza, walking through the parks in front of random weird art.

Johnny had made the trip worth his while. After they'd gotten to their room, having wished the guys a good night. Johnny had whispered in his ear, if he had any requests, hands on Daniel as soon as they'd locked the door.

They'd said goodnight to the guys around ten, and he was pretty sure they were stilling going at it at midnight. The lighting in the room had been great. Great for watching Johnny, for touching Johnny's golden hair in the light, for watching him take off his clothes while Daniel got comfortable on the bed. Seeing where old love bites were still bruising on his skin. Watching the way he sunk down, taking Daniel inside, like his legs somehow weren't tired from being in a car and all the walking. Like he still had energy to ride Daniel's dick.

He remembered laughing, Johnny surprised, stilling.

"I'm wondering if it's like dessert. Sometimes people are full but still

have room for dessert. I'm exhausted, I'm sure you're exhausted, but I still have energy for this, for sex with you."

"Until we both pass out," Johnny said with a laugh.

The image was funny, falling asleep mid-coitus. Daniel knew he'd fallen asleep before it got that far. Johnny had too, like the time he fell asleep, or started to during their phone call. But this was different. The idea of falling asleep inside of Johnny seemed different.

And then he wanted to try it. Accidental. On purpose. Save some time in the morning.

It'd been a bit of a conversation, to explain it, to see if Johnny was down for it. A confused, "So you want to go to sleep hard?"

Not quite. But eventually they figured it out. Johnny said he'd try it. Try sleeping with Daniel inside, that he was okay if whoever woke up first started moving to wake the other up.

There were parts of it Daniel couldn't see himself doing a lot. He moved around in his sleep, even if it was mostly in Johnny's space, it still limited him in how he could move. And Johnny normally moved. He liked falling asleep with Johnny curled up as a little spoon in his arms and then find that through the night he'd moved to wrap his arms around him as well. Or the couple of times Johnny had moved onto his back and Daniel woke up with his head on top of Johnny's pecs, enjoying the view, and the arms around him.

Daniel needed freedom of movement so he could roll around like a chinchilla taking a dirt bath while he slept.

But waking up inside Johnny was nice. Moving slowly, carefully waking him up by thrusting his hips and hearing the soft gasp Johnny made. The moans he made when he woke up. How he bucked his hips between Daniel's hand that was stroking him and Daniel's cock was a great way to start a morning. Listening to the way Johnny moaned his name, voice raspy with sleep but needy.

It hadn't lasted long but it'd been nice. And maybe a bit overdone when Johnny seemed to struggle to get comfortable in the car. Daniel drove carefully, hand on Johnny's leg trying to be as soothing as possible, apologetic and a little teasing when the guys ran off to get snacks at the gas station.

"Could rub something on it for you."

“I think that’s what the issue is.”

“Not my dick, I mean like a cream or medicine or something.”

Johnny had turned so red. But it wasn’t a no so Daniel kept an eye out. Popping into a pharmacy when he saw one.

The final leg of their trip was to Ohio State University. The plan was to surprise Jessica outside of her final class for the semester. Johnny wanted to pick up flowers. Jimmy had asked why he didn't just buy them in Chicago while they had the time.

“They'll die before we get there,” Johnny had said.

Though Daniel wondered if he was also just too tired to focus. Half asleep the way he normally was after a good fuck. But he was right. Five hours was a long time for flowers to sit in a warm car in the summer while they passed long stretches of fields that were nothing but corn and soybeans. Over and over again. Tall corn, short soybean.

It was so boring. Johnny slept for long stretches of it.

The guys had plenty to talk about, but the scenery was only interesting when it broke into farmland with animals. Cows, sheep, a random alpaca or horses they could spot from the road. By the time they got to Ohio Daniel had stored a days worth of complaints about how boring it was to get there and why was the landscape so boring? It was green though, lush, with big open skies of blue and the air was cleaner, less smog filled. So Daniel prepared to grumble a little less then he'd planned.

Mostly they'd been excited to see Jessica. And the scream she let out when she saw them outside her class was worth it. It'd have been better only if Dutch was there. It was an ache that came and went, felt stronger in moments where he would've been there, should've been there.

Daniel hadn't meant to cry but he had and then Jessica started crying and they had to explain to a concerned professor that everything was in fact all right and not in fact terrible and no one was hurt. Just that they'd missed each other greatly and they missed Dutch too.

It ached a bit as he put the photos in his scrapbook. All the group photos where Dutch should've been there. Should've been there to giggle at the almost weed like design on the football helmets that Jessica showed them, gone up with them in the bell tower to look at

campus and have Jessica show them where all her classes were and to listen to all her stories.

He should've gone swimming with them in the lakes or groaned with them when she excitedly asked if they were up for some rock climbing, yet begrudgingly got up at the crack of dawn with them to go. Or been there when the RA's looked confused at all the boys in her room and then told her that she was responsible for them, too exhausted to care since it was the end of term and her roommate had already moved out.

Going dancing with her at some end of year school event where the stars were just so damn bright out in the middle of nowhere, or falling asleep like Daniel had listening to some concert outside on the green with his head in Johnny's lap.

They'd stayed for a few days before trekking back, a different route with different memories and a promise that Jessica would join them on their trip to Seoul and Tokyo. Preparing to figure out a good overlap in everyone's fall breaks in September.

The photos from that scrapbook was more intense. Sleepy photos the guys had sent of them, Daniel and Johnny leaning against one another at the gate fast asleep at 5am, falling asleep again somewhere over North Pacific Ocean. Daniel's mouth was open, presumably snoring and drooling and he'd complained about but Johnny told him it had to go in the scrapbook because it was adorable and he just decided he'd quickly skip that page every time it showed up.

The thirteen hour flight to Incheon was exhausting. Johnny read a lot. The guys played games, chatting with Jessica who sat nearby with Ali. Ali who had joined them last minute via Tommy's invite not necessarily to see Dutch, but to see Kumiko and Jessica. The two girls sharing rooms and chatting the entire way, thick as thieves. Daniel wondered when that friendship had flourished, how much they kept in touch.

Dutch was waiting for them at the airport. His natural hair color completely grown out. All the bleach blonde gone. Daniel thought he'd run and hug him, the way the guys had done once to him and Johnny. But Jessica beat him to it. Taking off in a sprint, at a higher speed then Daniel expected, with more force than expected and Daniel watched the smile fade for Dutch's face and his eyes widen in horror, shifting his stance to catch her before she bowled him over. Which left him exposed when the other ex-cobras took off after her, the

floodgates opened and for the second time they collapsed into a tearful reunion.

You did this to yourself . Ali had said standing off to the side, amused but not joining in the hugs and tears. As the least excited Ali ended up being camera person.

And from their adventures Daniel had managed to get some good pictures of Ali and Jessica in colorful hanbok walking through the palaces, of all of them at N Seoul Tower, having traditional tea, barbecuing pork belly on grills, eating ice noodle soups, Dutch laughing when the guys were determined that they could handle the spicy versions of what they ate leading into him having to order more water for their table.

Hanging out at convenience stores and playing drinking games that Dutch taught them. Photos of them walking through yellow ginko tree lined streets and groves, trying all sorts of street food. Pictures of Daniel holding Johnny's hand, taking a bite of whatever snack he had with a mischievous grin. Trying on clothes, testing out new fashions, eating so much food. Every meal was a feast.

One day into their trip Dutch left them to enjoy some performances downtown only to return with Chozen in tow. Daniel had been stunned to see him, he knew they'd meet him in Tokyo in a few days since that had been part of the plan. That Chozen would be with Sato and Mr. Miyagi and Yukie to see Kumiko's performance. But Jessica, Ali, Tommy and Dutch seemed delighted to see him, dragging him along on their trips and Daniel begrudgingly added those photos to the pages of his scrapbook.

Chozen and Jessica standing with their jeans rolled up in the mudflats at Incheon catching tiny little crabs that sent Ali screaming and hiding behind Tommy and the guys. Chozen hiking behind them on the mountain paths. There were so many that Jessica practically ran up, leaving them in the dust. Photos of Dutch sweaty and smiling after one of his taekwondo practices, pleased they'd been there to cheer him on. Going out afterwards together for fried chicken and beer with his classmates.

They even flew out to Jeju. Daniel had pictures of them picking hallabong, a citrus fruit, standing next to volcanic statues, jumping out of tea fields and hiking up the volcanic mountain, and playing at the beach. There were so many memories packed into that week leading up to their trip to Tokyo.

And Tokyo... Kumiko had hugged him so hard that he thought she was going to break his spine. Somehow she'd managed to lift him up off the ground in a little twirl that made his face and ears burn when they arrived at New Tokyo International Airport. But thankfully she wasn't the only one who got that treatment. Chozen also ended up picked up with a bright red face as she teased him in Okinawan. Johnny got revenge for them, scooping her up instead and beating her in her attempt of sneak attack hugs.

“You've gotten so strong, is the dance troupe also for body builders?”

“No! But I've been helping with carrying things around the set because we're short staffed. Don't worry I'll put all of you to work too!”

It'd been so nice. They'd arrived before Mr. Miyagi, Sato and Yukie. They'd gone up to Mt. Fuji, an exhausting day of over 6 hours of hiking to break out over the clouds and into the cold but the view had been spectacular. And the photos they took were stunning. Though they had to collapse at a restaurant at the base camp for several hours to get their feet under them again. Except Kumiko and Jessica who had treated the whole thing like a walk in the park and were catching up happily over coffee while they laid around trying to regain their energy.

It was so nice to have new views outside their windows, to try new foods. They signed up for cooking classes and Daniel got one of his favorite photos from that class, Johnny wearing a cute pink apron, focused on what he was making with flour on his face. He also loved the photos of Johnny dressed up in yukatas and nemaki's and the girls got him into one colorful kimono.

Chozen had froze in the spot and looked faint, which Daniel understood. It'd been fun to dress up and go to the shrines and temples, to walk around together. Johnny was adamant they got plenty of pictures of Daniel too, dressed in a nice red which did look good in the photo Johnny took of him walking through the park with all the red maple trees or eating candied fruits. There were too many good photos from the days they dressed up.

And even one bad one that he didn't put in the scrapbook, but that was hiding with all his other photos, one where he'd gotten impatient when they got back to their room, trying to help Johnny out of all his layers, wanting to touch his skin, to feel him, and he'd landed on their bed in such a beautiful way, not exposed fully but like a pin up model. Since his traditional bag was tied around his wrist, something Kumiko

had been insistent on, accessories, it had been automatic. A beautiful photo of Johnny looking up at him in such a sexy way that it got his heart pounding just thinking about it.

They'd gotten to stay at an onsen, and that had been dangerous. Chilling in warm water with their friends had been fine, it'd been fun, but it was too tempting to tease Johnny, too difficult to keep his hands to himself that he had to make someone sit between them.

He didn't know how Chozen handled it. Though to be fair he sat on the other end of the water like they were all hanging out in a jacuzzi or something in the states, like it was fine. Like knowing the guy he had a crush on was naked five feet away wasn't even tempting. It made Daniel wonder if he was an uncontrollable pervert.

Though to be fair, Daniel didn't know what he would've done if Chozen had misbehaved. It would've been bad. But the guys did tease Daniel a couple times for staring too long. And they didn't stop teasing him about it the whole trip. Not until Mr. Miyagi, Sato and Yukie arrived.

Dutch was so happy to see them and he had good photos of Dutch and Mr. Miyagi talking, walking together through a park. Of him laughing with Sato and listening to Yukie. They had a million questions for him. How is Korea? How is training? Looking healthy and strong. And he'd beamed.

For a long time Daniel had realized, a bit with Johnny's help that Mr. Miyagi was a father figure for him. Not just a dear friend, practically best friend, but an adopted father. And the cobras were adopted brothers. Friendships so close they became family he chose. Just like Johnny had those bonds. But it was nice to see that those bonds crossed over.

That Dutch, who lived alone most of the time and rarely saw his parents received part of that relationship he was looking for elsewhere, from his sanbonim who was tough but clearly cared a lot in a way so vastly different then Kreese it was shocking, to watching Yukie point out clothes that would look good on him, or Sato laughing with him, or Dutch listening to Mr. Miyagi.

Daniel had known when he arrived in LA that he was lonely. He just kept pushing it down. But sitting in their special reserved seats, dressed in suits and the girls in pretty dresses to watch Kumiko perform, with a beautiful bouquet at the ready for the end, Daniel

realized he wasn't the only one who'd felt so alone. Not just him, not just Mr. Miyagi, but all of them. And they were lucky to be there together.

All the treasured memories that he was finishing up in his scrap book. Photos of them with Kumiko after the performance, Yukie, Sato, Chozen, and Mr. Miyagi looking so proud. With just the girls, which had been silly and with the guys all nicely dressed in their suits. So proud of her that as soon as she said she was free to go they carried her out like a bunch of dumb frat boys, but like a queen. And it'd been invigorating, being with all of them in Tokyo. An autumn together.

Laura sat down next to him picking up the road trip one, flipping through it with a warm smile, manicured nails going through the pages.

"These are nice Daniel, you've put a lot of time and effort into them."

"It seemed like a good idea, a good way to reminiscence."

"It is. And it's nice to see so many good photos of him. Happy and smiling, on adventures outside of California. These make me happy," Laura said flipping through and then leaning over to see what Daniel was working on.

"Yeah, they make me happy too."

"Have you heard from your cousin yet?"

"Not yet."

"And classes?"

"All caught up with my papers and homework."

She smiled at him, ruffling his hair. "You know you look much better, healthier now. I wonder what did it? Probably moving in with me huh? I'm like the cool mother-in-law you want to live with," she said with a teasing smile.

Johnny had said something similar a couple mornings ago. How he looked less stressed, happier, curled up warmly by Johnny's side in his bed. He didn't like that they didn't have their own place, it felt weird moving back in with family or Mr. Miyagi, but it was new to live with Laura.

She got up early and worked in her garden and went for runs around the neighborhood with her own Walkman, and then made breakfast. Intense breakfast, that Daniel had a feeling was specifically for Johnny. One of those things she was making up for out of lost time and guilt. Big breakfasts of too much food, packed lunches, dinner, snacks. Movie nights curled up on the couch.

Johnny had fought back a little, arguing that it was too much, and the compromise was the two of them would cook. And it was sweet to watch them interact, figuring out recipes and working together, teasing and gentle bickering. How it always should have been. And it was relaxing. A feeling of a warm home full of love. And Daniel liked pressing in close to Johnny in his bed, touching him in slow ways, kissing his skin and watching him try to be quiet, not silent, just quieter then they were in their own apartment and own space.

And it was a relief not to be working at the apprenticeship. To not be balancing so many things that he'd felt like he was drowning. Adding more and more pressure to himself that as soon as he'd stopped it felt like he was floating. But Johnny held his hand, not letting him float off until the ground became stable underneath him again.

He was able to visit Johnny and Mr. Miyagi at the shop more, he was able to drive down to UCLA to study with the guys, he was able to take his time and focus on his studies and get to know his classmates. He got to relax a little and hadn't realized how badly he'd needed that. To have nice lazy mornings with Johnny, to enjoy long calls with his family and friends again. Though he did pay for them, embarrassed with how bad the phone bill was.

Sometimes for family calls he'd run over to his ma's and that was less stressful. And it'd be nice to have her talk to them and then he'd talk to them and he'd catch up on everything without racking up Laura's bill quite so badly.

And that was nice too. Visiting his mom. Having meals with her and hanging out with her and catching up. Not living with her still but still close enough for a frequent visits. And she came over frequently, brought over dinners that Laura was delighted about.

He'd been worried her feelings would get hurt, staying with Laura instead of her. But she'd smiled at him and kissed his cheek.

“They never got that time huh? I get it. You want to live together and give him that time to spend with her. Don't you worry, I'll be right

here, closer than we were when you had that apartment and I'll see you more too."

They never had what Daniel and his ma had, and he'd nearly cried when she'd understood, her own eyes tear filled. Rubbing his back. It felt like they'd gotten cheated. Tricked out of a normal life, of all that time and bonding they should've had. So he went to his Ma's place a couple times a week, to eat dinner and give them space, more time to just live together like they once should've.

And he caught up with Louie. He'd been there through the summer, a pest going to the dojo and following Chozen around like a lost dog, following Daniel around and Johnny. And then while they were gone in the autumn, somewhere between Seoul and Tokyo he went home. Just a little note left behind given to him by his mom.

"Thanks for everything Cuz, needed it. Time to grow up and stop running."

Johnny had been worried but when they got through to Louie's home, he was there, asking about the trip, as if nothing had every happened, as if that had been the plan all along. Daniel had been pissed. Months of Louie not calling home, of worrying them, and then he ran home as soon as they were gone? Johnny had taken the phone from him, answering Louie's questions while Daniel fumed.

It had taken a lot of grumpy dinners with his mom to remember that Louie was a teen. That he was young, that he was going through a lot, and that it wasn't easy.

"Maybe he just needed to get away from it all for a bit," Johnny had said one night while Daniel had been ranting about it again, after another call with Louie that got nowhere.

Daniel had flopped onto the bed looking at him. "What do you mean?"

"All of it hasn't been easy right? His dad being sick? Family talking about it. You know Louie best, you never pushed it right? To talk about his dad being sick. So if he wanted to escape from all of that, to have a vacation from reality, logically you'd be where he'd go."

Daniel had mulled that over, assumed Johnny was right. But he still wasn't happy about it. He was determined that the next time Louie came back to LA and tried to live with him Louie would be put to work. Either at the shop or if Daniel had the dealership open there.

He'd work until Daniel felt better. Which might be forever.

Johnny said it was because he cared, because he was worried. Daniel said it was because he was pissed, but he thought Johnny was probably right on some level.

"Abuela gave me a recipe to test out, you up for being a taste tester later this week? Apparently she's quizzing me on my cooking skills next month," Laura said passing Daniel a glass of lemonade.

"What's next month?"

"There's a festival and I offered to help her at her booth, but in order to be allowed I have to show I can cook some of her recipes. She made it seem like it was a very tough test, but it's really an honor. I don't have any family recipes to cook and the fact she's just letting me have some, letting me learn her recipes? I nearly cried in her restaurant," Laura said. "So I gotta perfect these and the Browns are out of town for the week so I'm starting with you guys and Lucille."

"Ma will love it," Daniel said.

"I hope so, she's a great cook it's kind of intimidating."

They sat together in comfortable silence, Laura flipping through magazines, occasionally watching him place photos, making his way through their journeys, reliving them and remembering all their adventures until Johnny came home.

Daniel cooked dinner while they chatted, having picked up ingredients from the store.

Laura had only recently relented on the your a guest you shouldn't have to cook rule. When Daniel very pointedly said family is different .

The face she'd made when he said that warmed his heart. Stunned and pleased with tears in her eyes. Family. When your family is small, when it's just you tightly holding on to one hand, surviving, it's hard to look beyond and to see the other people around you who are family. And even though Laura was strong, she was still figuring it out. Still learning where her support system was and what her support system was versus what Johnny's was, not realizing that her care towards Daniel and the cobras flowed back to her.

It was nice to cook for her. He liked how excited she got over what he

made. Johnny always complimented him but it was like once Laura enjoyed it she managed to pull more words out of Johnny, and it was like being bathed in a warm wave of compliments.

Chicken Parmesan was easy and he'd gotten all the ingredients earlier. Johnny had given him a warm embrace, a soft whisper of Anything I can do to help?

Daniel let him set the table, kissing his cheek.

Daniel listened to Laura's day, shared his own and then it was Johnny's turn. Stories about the shop, about Mr. Miyagi, how many times Chozen came by, his upcoming plans with the kids he babysat or other volunteer stuff.

"The kids are moving," Johnny said mostly to his plate.

He'd looked a little bummed but Daniel had figured if he didn't come clean early he'd get it out of him later, before bed. Possibly slipping in the shower with him and physically cornering him until he caved. Though it never got that bad. He was more forthcoming then he once was.

"The one's you babysit? Where to? The Hills? Malibu?"

"Texas."

That was far. Too far to continue babysitting.

Daniel didn't really get it. There was always more kids that needed to be babysat. Maybe he was burnt out babysitting since he already drew the short end of the stick babysitting baby cousins all the time back in Newark. Not to mention Louie.

But Johnny cared, a lot about these kids, and he was good with them.

"Sorry about that honey," Laura said. "I'm sure it'll be good for them. The air will be cleaner huh?"

"Yeah," Johnny said. "They were the last of Mr. Miyagi's lessons that still needed me."

Ah. More things coming to an end. Maybe when dinner was over, after they watched TV with Laura, or a movie or something Daniel would pull Johnny aside and tell him how much Daniel needed him. How much he'd always need him. And then they could make love, through

tears or something.

"What about the animal sanctuary?"

"College kids, high schoolers and scouts took over and that hasn't let up," Johnny said.

"It might be a good time to relax," Laura said gently, hand reaching out to Johnny's arm.

Daniel agreed. If Johnny relaxed they could relax together, spend more time together. They could have even more sex. So much sex that they forgot where one body ended and the other began. Just a tangle of limbs in ecstasy.

"A while ago I went to the dojo."

"You did?" Daniel said surprised, nearly dropping his fork.

"Chozen invited me."

Damn it. He shouldn't have included Chozen's photos in the scrapbooks. Any invitation always seemed to tempt fate. At this point Daniel was going to have just yell back off he's mine every time he saw Chozen.

"Was it okay? Are you okay?" Laura asked gently.

"Yeah, he changed everything. Like even things I hadn't thought of. Like door knobs and lighting. Fixtures and stuff. It's a completely different place. But...he offered something that never crossed my mind."

Daniel chewed his lip stabbing a little too hard at his chicken, cursing Chozen. If he'd made a move, if he'd tried to talk Johnny into something… his brain was going wild.

Apparently Chozen liked to draw, liked to paint, what if he knew Johnny's schedule was freeing up? What if he was offering to paint Johnny? Sketch him? But naked? Or in pin up style?

Even mad, Daniel wanted it. Like some dumb college dorm, like he'd seen when he'd visited the guys or Jessica, he wanted a pin up poster of Johnny on his wall. A calendar of Johnny. Like he'd wanted long ago watching Johnny work at Mr. Miyagi's place.

But the idea that Chozen might reposition Johnny for a better pose,

hands on him. Daniel didn't like it.

Daniel was going to give Chozen a piece of his mind.

Shit, he wasn't paying attention.

What had Johnny said?

"...sensei."

"Sensei?" Daniel said with a frown.

"Yeah, uh...co-sensei. He said he could use the help with the kids and if I want to, since he hasn't taught kids it might be good. And I thought, well originally I thought no because me ? A sensei? No one should trust me with that power, I mean what if...what if I'm like Kreese? What if even though I've worked so hard to unlearn all the bad stuff he taught me I repeat it? What if the venom is still there and I spread it to this new group? But Mr. Miyagi well he keeps talking to me about it, about how it's not still there. That teachers are still learning too, at least at first and I'll figure out my own way if that's what I want to do. He said I could be a good one. And well I've been thinking I might...I think I want to do it."

"Teach karate?" Daniel said softly.

"Not full time. I mean just a few classes here and there, mostly the kids. And I'd never be doing it alone, I'd be with Chozen. So it'd be safe."

He seriously thought Daniel's question was related to whether he should be allowed to teach kids? A protest that he shouldn't? It wasn't that, it was more concern. How did he word it properly? Not to scare off this tentative step into trying to figure out what he liked to do? Steps Johnny hadn't taken yet.

"Johnny, are you going to be okay being in that dojo? I'm not worried about you and kids, you're great with kids, I mean we've got all the loving art from Yuna to prove it. And artwork from the kids you babysit. And I bet you'll be a great teacher. My question was more a concern for your mental wellbeing. That...I mean... I haven't been in that dojo yet and I was only in there for a few months. You were in there for years . I want to make sure you'll be okay."

"I think so. At the very least I want to try," Johnny said.

Daniel nodded reaching out and squeezing Johnny's hand. Johnny as a sensei. While he worried it still weirdly fit. He could see Johnny working with kids, teaching them karate and moves. After all he taught Daniel a lot, and Daniel was a great student...to anyone but Johnny. With Johnny he wanted to see how far he could push it, how much distraction he could cause before he could get what he wanted. But sensei Lawrence might get to wear a sensei gi.

Maybe...Maybe Daniel would go watch.

Could you go watch a class?

Surely Daniel could right?

It'd be nice to watch Johnny work out. Maybe Daniel could get an iced coffee or something, maybe ice cream and could sit off to the side and just watch. The way he bounced on his feet, the way he moved so fluidly. The question he supposed then was, could Daniel handle being back in there? After the last time? Being in the dojo at night by himself with Silver had been creepy enough. But the last time he'd been there Kreese had tried to kill Johnny and he'd been determined that if Kreese moved Daniel would be the one to crush Kreese's windpipe.

Would he feel the same cold shaky rage and terror he'd felt then? Would his heart freak out in his chest or would he freeze in fear? Would the promise of seeing Johnny work out, hair all floppy over his hachimaki, arms exposed because the teacher's gi's never seemed to have sleeves so he could see the muscles in Johnny's arms when he moved, or his chest, his pecs exposed from the cut of the gi, probably totally unaware too.

Okay, maybe Johnny shouldn't do it, maybe the gi would be too obscene. Maybe too revealing. Daniel hadn't been able to handle people flirting with Johnny at the shop. What would he do if some military dude or older student flirted with Johnny at the dojo, or heck ogled him in his gi?

He had been wanting to see if his jealous streak had chilled out. Maybe this would be a good test? Maybe Johnny would be fine, because Chozen would for sure as hell defend Johnny's honor.

But-

Daniel wanted to be that person.

Johnny was talking to his mother and his eyes flicked to Daniel, met his gaze for a couple seconds then quickly looked away, the slightest blush on his face.

Oh shit, was he that easy to read? Well surely to Johnny he was, but he thought he'd mastered his expressions lately. Could Johnny tell? That in his head he was putting his hands on the sides of a sensei gi and pushing it open so he could touch Johnny's chest, so his chest was exposed while he kissed Johnny, while Johnny moaned, grinding against Daniel's leg.

Maybe they could spar and Daniel would fight real hard to pin him down and ask what his reward was for winning. Because while sparring had led touching in the past, rubbing against one another, mouths on the other, he wanted to do more. Not that that wasn't pleasant or fun. He enjoyed all of that.

But sometimes Johnny teased that he could still take Daniel with his hands tied behind his back. And Daniel wanted to do that. Want to spar, win, and see if Johnny could in fact take him with his hands tied behind his back, pinned to a mat.

Though they probably had different ideas about that conversation. Daniel meant Johnny taking his dick. But he wasn't sure if that'd be messed up. If he could handle being in that dojo, if Johnny could handle being in that dojo. If...what had it been? The smell of alcohol? No. Smoke. Cigar smoke, had sent Johnny into the corner of the shower at Mr. Miyagi's, rubbing his skin raw trying to get rid of the smell, the feeling of Kreese's arm around his neck.

It would have to wait. A daydream, a hot sexy daydream.

Right. Focus.

Laura had said something and was looking at him.

"Sorry?" Daniel said.

Laura smiled. "I was just saying that this is really good and I'm starting to get spoiled by all the cooking you and Lucille do."

"I'm the one getting spoiled," Daniel said smiling warmly.

"Ah, Johnny you should see the scrapbooks Daniel's been working on. He finished your road trip one and is mostly through your trip to South Korea and Japan."

"Really?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah, I'll show you after dinner."

It was nice, sitting with the two of them. To see how far they'd come, how far they've healed. Remnants of Sid were mostly all gone. The woman Daniel first met was a stranger compared to the woman sitting before him. And the way she interacted with Johnny was so easy, so carefree and happy. She was still her. She'd always be her. But it was like someone had taken all this weight from her shoulders.

They cleaned up after dinner, Johnny washing the dishes, Laura drying and putting them away. Daniel cleaned up his scrap-booking things, setting aside what still needed to be done, more adventures at temples, tea ceremony photos that Johnny had hated but suffered through, stuff they did because Kumiko recommended it or Sato, Yukie and Mr. Miyagi were adamant about it.

They watched some TV with Laura then she headed off to bed with kiss on top of the head for the both of them.

"How was school?" Johnny asked folding the blanket they'd been using and putting it back on the back of the couch.

"Good. Surprisingly easier."

"Did you get to talk to Louie?"

His birthday was coming up and they were trying to figure out what to do. How to celebrate.

"Not yet. I'm going over to Ma's tomorrow and figure we'll call together. Hey, when are you going to talk to Chozen about being a sensei?" Daniel asked gathering up the scrapbooks and putting them safely on one of the bookshelves for later.

"You're okay about that?" Johnny asked hand hovering over the light switch.

"Mixed feelings," Daniel said, kissing his cheek and walking past to Johnny's room. "But they're for selfish reasons."

"Selfish reasons? How?" Johnny asked flipping the light and following him.

Daniel kept walking past the door, past their bed towards the

bathroom. He plugged the tub and started filling it up with water, looking over the bath salts and oils.

"I'm jealous of the time Chozen will get to spend with you, a side of you he'll get to see but I won't, not as much anyway, of you sparring with other people. I'm working on it. Or trying. I think...honestly-"

Daniel found a mix he liked and poured it in watching the water get a little shinier, a little cloudier. He looked at Johnny and put his hand on Johnny's chest.

"You will be a good sensei. Better then Kreese. I think it'd be good for you too, possibly...healing?"

Johnny took his hand gently, lifting it to his lips.

"You'll be okay?"

"Yeah, I mean I might still show up and watch, watch you teach and train and practice and maybe it won't be a nice good pure thing," Daniel said unbuttoning his flannel.

"What does that mean?"

"You probably won't want me there."

"Why wouldn't I want you there?"

"Because all I would want is for everyone else to leave and to spar with you one on one, until I pinned you down and we had sex on the mats."

"Is that what you were thinking about at dinner?" Johnny asked.

Daniel stepped back with a grin, testing the water with his hand, stripping and getting in with a pleased sigh, leaning back, head against the tile. He opened one eye and looked at Johnny, face pink, thinking probably the same dirty day dream Daniel had had earlier.

Daniel tapped at the water.

"You going to join me? I'll wash your hair. And back. Or are you just going to stand there and watch me?"

Johnny blinked then started taking off his clothes and Daniel leaned his arm against the edge of the tub, following every inch of exposed skin that appeared. He seemed a little lost for a moment, looking at

the bath, at Daniel.

Daniel patted the water again. He'd get a nice view no matter what Johnny did but he also just wanted to hug him, to feel that warm weight against his skin.

Johnny stepped in carefully, sinking down in the warm water, back to Daniel.

"Is this okay?" he asked, before leaning forward and turning off the water.

"Yeah," Daniel said reaching out and pulling Johnny back to him, hugging him tightly. "How was your day? And I don't mean tell me about Mr. Miyagi or customers or how much the shop made. I mean, you, how was your day?"

Johnny was quiet, settling, relaxing against him.

"Better now."

"How so?"

Johnny's hand came to Daniel's knee, the one that'd been injured what felt like so long ago, gently rubbing a circle against it with his thumb. "I like coming home," he twisted his head back to look at Daniel. "Because you're here."

"Cheesy," Daniel said grinning and kissing him.

"You love cheese. Mac and cheese is your favorite."

" Your my favorite," Daniel said.

"Cheesy."

"It's true!"

"So was mine! I like spending the day in the shop, I like seeing Chozen and Sato and Yukie. I miss seeing Dutch and I miss breaks where the guys come up. I like being surrounded by little tiny happy looking trees or helping Mr. Miyagi heal sick ones. But my favorite part of every day is to do absolutely nothing with you. Waking up next to you in bed with no rush because Mr. Miyagi likes opening the shop after fishing and you no longer are running to get hours in before classes. Because you moved your classes to afternoons so you could sleep in with me."

"And have sex."

"Well I like our slow mornings, and I like that at the end of the day I'm excited to go home."

"You really like it here huh?"

"I mean it's nice, but it's you. I'm excited to get home to you. Wherever that is. To listen to whatever you want to talk about, whether it's something important or nothing. I like listening to the frustrated way you try and explain school stuff until it clicks and then the excited way you run off to jot something down. I like eating with you and the way you twirl your pasta in an efficient matter except when it always fails at least once and you get so mad when it happens that you slice it all up into tiny tiny pieces and just stab at it with your fork. I like that you've been reading through the newspapers and magazines and picking fun foods for us to cook together on the weekends and I like hearing about each one you want to try. Or the restaurants that have opened you want to check out for our date night. I like just sitting in front of the TV watching stuff and holding your hand, even when it gets sweaty."

"It's because it's LA! It's too hot here, everything is sweaty and gross."

"Just sitting here, best part of my day," Johnny said resting his head against Daniel's chest, having sunk down enough in the water to do so.

Daniel leaned forward pressing a kiss to the top of his head.

"Mine too," he said softly.

He liked those boring quiet moments with Johnny. His classmates complained about being bored, wanting to go on adventures and about life being so dull. They wanted to go to the bars. But Daniel had had enough adventures for a life time.

The adventures he wanted now were easy ones. To see his friends wherever they may be, to drive around in the Avanti or the Ford with no real goal, to have dinners with his Ma, to kiss Johnny in the mornings and the evenings and randomly throughout the day. He wanted to bump elbows while they were folding laundry together, and then to keep doing it on purpose until they collapsed, play fighting and making out on the bed, ruining whatever effort they'd started and having to begin again.

He liked just sitting there in warm water, holding Johnny and feeling the thrum of his heart beneath the palm of his hand, the gentle rise and fall of his chest as he breathed.

But the water would get cold and their fingers would get prune-y. So he tapped Johnny's chest before getting the shampoo and washing Johnny's hair. It was quiet in the bathroom and it was peaceful. Johnny's hair was soft under his fingers and he had moved to an angle so he could see his face, eyes shut and relaxed. He was enjoying it. Enjoying Daniel massaging his scalp.

How many times had they bathed and showered together and how often had Johnny turned absolutely blissed boneless in his arms? It wasn't enough. It felt like a dessert when he was craving something sweet, or water when he was thirsty after working out on a hot day.

After everything Johnny had been through, after everything they both had been through, to be able to just hold Johnny close and watch him relax, close his eyes and not strategize about their next move, or worry about how best to help Daniel or even before that, just unable to relax because of Sid or Kreese...for him to be so secure in Daniel's arms sometimes brought tears to his eyes. To be told he was home and understand what Johnny meant because he felt it too.

Johnny would be okay as a sensei. He'd be safe. He'd be good at it. And Daniel knew he'd come home asap, because he was home. Just like Daniel every time he went out with his classmates. How he'd leave early because he wanted to be home, wherever Johnny was.

Let them try to have their adventures.

His adventures were over, he'd earned rest, even if that rest was watching his lover's peaceful and relaxed face while he washed and rinsed his hair. While he conditioned it, rinsed it, while they talked quietly about nothing of any importance but important to them because it was between the two of them. Washing and scrubbing Johnny's back and then moving on, washing every inch because Johnny was relaxed.

Well… until he wasn't.

Johnny's blue eyes met his as Daniel pressed fingers gently against him, rubbing.

"Haven't cleaned here yet," Daniel said. "Can I?"

"I should've known it was a trap."

"A trap? What ever could you possibly mean?"

"I was actually falling asleep. Few more minutes and I'd have been out."

"Is that a no?" Daniel asked.

"It’s not a no," Johnny said, shifting so his legs were spread.

Daniel pressed a kiss into his shoulder, hugging him close, an excuse really to just hold onto a handful of Johnny's right pec as he pushed his fingers inside.

Johnny's breath caught, Daniel could feel his heart racing and he kissed more skin as he worked, slowly opening Johnny up, whispering softly to him, enjoying the sounds Johnny made, this version of him only Daniel ever saw.

And that tasted sweeter than any dessert he could order or conceive of. He loved every second of every moment. He'd thought he'd be like his classmates, dreaming of big things. Adventures and big moments. He thought he wanted attention, wanted to stand center stage. And he'd gotten that, a taste of it, but the spotlight burned and it refused to leave him alone until Johnny took a bat to it and broke the lights.

There were moments where he still wanted the light on him, but they were smaller moments. Mostly he just wanted Johnny's attention, wanted all of his focus. Bobby had told him it was probably because he was an only child. Not all that great at sharing.

And he was working on it. But sometimes, when he got stressed during finals, but more frequently, before he quit his job, he worried that Johnny would just leave. That someone else would whisk him away. Someone bigger or stronger, or worse, Chozen. But every time he had that nightmare Johnny was around somewhere. If not in their bed then on the couch or making something awful that his half groggy brain concocted. Like frying up spam for a sandwich that sounded remarkably good at 1am.

It wasn't actually awful. It was a go to response. Daniel was starting to understand his own ones. Like trying to take care of everything himself. Not asking for help. Not communicating when he was worried things were falling a part.

Johnny's go to had been to run, to make himself cheap comfort meals that his mom probably had made when they had nothing. Vienna sausages fried on a slice of cheap white bread. Things they always had in the cupboard like it needed to be there in case of an emergency. Something Daniel had found in the back of Laura's cabinets. Spam, Vienna sausages, powdered milk. Just in case items. Just in case the rug got pulled out from under them there was still that thing.

Even though the fridge and freezer were full. Abuela's tamales, fish from Mr. Miyagi, cookies freshly baked from the Browns in the cookie jar. Things Johnny could heat up and eat at midnight, but it was like he was saving that love for later, savoring it, and eating the stuff that was cheap and he'd had as a child first.

The most creative was probably peanut butter sandwiches that Johnny fried. Daniel did like those. And he always woke up, nightmare or no, when he smelled those, hugging Johnny's back and asking him to make him one too.

No matter how bad things were for him and Ma, food hadn't been a concern. They were close enough to family that they'd just eat with them through the leaner times. But Johnny always made him a plate, always split whatever midnight concoction he made with Daniel, like he knew eventually Daniel would come find him. And maybe that's what he should've seen. Instead of waking up in a panic in a bed by himself. Was that Johnny was just beyond the door, waiting to be found, with food at three am ready if he wanted, to sit with him, groggy on the couch, heavy with sleep and eat whatever it was he'd made, wrinkling his nose at canned meats or drippy pre-packaged deli meat.

But it was fine, because even when the world seemed too quiet, too big or too small, when the world seemed dark and unforgiving and lonely, when nightmares held a tight clawed hand on his heart, making it beat panicked poisoned thoughts into his mind, someone was there by his side. Daniel had Johnny and Johnny had Daniel. And now, now when that happened Johnny woke Daniel up.

A soft, “Hey I'm going to go make a spam sandwich you want one?”

His voice was usually tight, his eyes wide awake for the ungodly hour, his hair was mussed and his body too warm and Daniel would mumble some random affirmation and roll out of bed, following Johnny to eat whatever he got, before falling asleep curled up with him on the couch, always on top of him, weighing him down into the

cushions until the sun rose and dawn broke and all the ghosts disappeared.

Johnny was moaning, pressing back against his hands, asking for more, saying Daniel's name in a way that sent a shiver down his spine. Daniel looked around, trying to figure out his logistics.

"Can you push yourself up on your knees?" Daniel asked sliding his fingers out.

Johnny blinked, looked around a little dazed, a pouty frown on his face before moving forward, on his hands and knees. "Like this?"

Daniel stared longer than he probably should've reaching out and squeezing Johnny's ass.

"Daniel?"

"Yeah," Daniel managed, pushing his fingers back inside and watching, enraptured at how easily they went in, Johnny's moans going straight to his dick.

" Daniel ," Johnny's voice was a little more needy, a little admonishing, a hurry up hidden in his own name.

Daniel looked around, soap wasn't really the best and if he could just reach, yup, there was the lube. He pushed himself up carefully. His knee was going to bother him later, but he didn't care, Johnny was waiting and ready and there was an expanse of his back to kiss as he slid in. Kissing the back of his neck, his shoulders, watching him move and shift to accommodate, to adjust.

Daniel was busy enjoying every little thing, the way Johnny pressed back against him, moving with him, the sounds he made, of the water shifting around them, the way his skin felt.

They were a team. And while Daniel had been on teams before, was on a soccer team now, there was something different about a two person team with a back up.

Daniel knew Johnny had his back, and he was trying to make sure Johnny knew Daniel had his. But he supposed, maybe he knew that Johnny knew on some level. If he didn't he wouldn't be there, he would be on his knees letting Daniel thrust into him in a bath tub, or make love to them enough times in their bed that Daniel almost lost track, almost .

Daniel's biggest adventure, when his classmates asked, was coming home to Johnny, was finishing his scrapbook and making dinner. It was going grocery shopping and trying to figure out recipes he wanted to try. It was making Johnny moan under him and come in the bath, cleaning up and then going for another round in bed before Johnny managed to put pajamas on. It was kissing his nose and his forehead and his cheeks and everywhere he could reach while Johnny was looking up at him. It was holding his hand, fingers interlaced, palms pressed together as he rocked deeper with Johnny's legs wrapped around him, the soft parts of his thighs pressing into Daniel's hips, holding on tight. Like he didn't want it to end either, like he needed Daniel just as much, wanted him just as much, liked having him deep inside.

It'd be okay. Johnny as a sensei. Maybe other guys would hit on him. Maybe military dudes or hell even Chozen would. But he'd come home to Daniel every night. Because this was theirs. This bond, this relationship. And maybe Daniel still didn't like the idea of people hitting on Johnny but maybe he could understand. After all he got it. Johnny was gorgeous. But they'd never see him like this, loving everything Daniel did, hungry for kisses, and the way Daniel moved, a symphony of their own creation, guided both along the beats to a perfect crescendo.

Chapter End Notes

Bison Burger
Chicago Deep Dish Pizza
Hanbok
Korean barbecue
ice noodles spicy version
Korean fried chicken
Chicken Parmesan

Pomp and Circumstance

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny put on his suit, the one Daniel seemed to like the best, agonizing over which tie went with it and dumb little accessories like tie clips and cuff links. He'd styled his hair, a little, though it'd taken hours to get it the way he wanted and he wasn't sure it'd stay that way. He'd polished his dress shoes and now had to go get the bouquet he'd ordered from the florist.

He might've over done it again. Just a bit. He knew it was going to be a big one. But it was a big day. He checked over his mental check list. He had the good camera his mom had bought him for his last birthday that Daniel had immediately teased Johnny with, asking if he'd put that cheerleading uniform back on so he could add to some calendar he was making in his head. They'd found a dark room that could be rented, Daniel reassuring him that he knew how to do it because of the photography class he'd taken and really it was good practice for the class, but he'd never share these photos and it was only then that Johnny agreed.

Johnny had plenty of film. Fresh film. Film he could actually drop off to get someone else to develop without embarrassing himself when he went to go pick it up.

Bobby had made a cake and he'd bring that. Lucille was taking care of dinner. He had the tickets that were his gift in his breast pocket. He had his keys. He'd had his morning coffee already and breakfast, a little lonely because Daniel had already left. But it was nice, to be in their own space again. Apartment number 2, because Daniel was adamant that it was okay. Had some surprise he was going to tell Johnny that night. Though when, Johnny didn't know because the party was at Lucille's and it was going to be busy.

He looked at the clock, time to go.

Things were going to change again. But it'd bee nice and peaceful and quiet for a while and Johnny loved it. He loved sitting in their apartment, having moved to West Hollywood just to try it for a bit and how easy it was to hold hands at the restaurants and at the bars. The way no one batted an eye when they kissed, or danced together.

Did he catch more people eyeing Daniel then usual? Sort of. Less girls, but still some girls, but way more guys, but then they'd see Johnny and they'd back off. Half the time. The other half of the time they seemed to study Johnny and then Daniel like they viewed it as a challenge.

Together it was to grab a drink after work and sit and listen to bands play, holding hands and talking about their day, or dancing. Lost in a crowd of people who didn't care and didn't mind that they were there, because they were welcome and the same. It was easier than getting a list from Dutch or Jimmy or dancing alone in their apartment. Because Daniel loved to dance. So once a week, at least, they picked a bar and went dancing, slowly getting to know their new neighborhood, getting to know other people who knew more then they did. They attended shows, befriended their neighbors and some nights when they lie in their bed Daniel said maybe he'd start here. In West Hollywood. Maybe he should open his dealership here.

Johnny knew Daniel didn't want to stay. He didn't want to live there, he didn't like the half hour drive on a good day with good traffic to get to the shop or Mr. Miyagi or their moms. But the guys were so damn close. They saw them all the time. Dinners on campus or at their apartment, study dates where they came over and sprawled out on the floor and on the couch and sometimes spent the night. Dancing together at the clubs, saying yes to strangers because why not? There was magic there and it was nice to be close to their friends, it felt more like a college experience, or at least seemed to be for Daniel.

But he liked living near Encino. Johnny was pretty sure that's where Daniel wanted to put down roots. Johnny did too, but he didn't particularly care where. Anywhere was fine. As long as they were together. But Daniel had his sights set high, he had fancy taste even though he scrimped and saved, even though he blanched at the idea of Johnny booking them a night in Bel Air again, or any other fancy place, even though he was still adamant about economy when they flew. It was like he didn't feel like he'd earned it yet. And when Johnny picked up his bouquet, the big maybe too big one with peony's for good fortune and prosperity, irises of wisdom and victory, Alstroemeria for prosperity, Agapanthus and baby's breath for love and tiger lily for pride he did so knowing Daniel might think it was too much.

It was heavy, which was fine. It'd weigh Johnny down, keep him from the emotions he felt, the warmth in his chest as he found his seat next to Lucille who waved and smiled and kissed his cheek, hooking her

arm through his with a warm squeeze. He tuned out of a lot of it. Eyes watching for Daniel, following him moving around, his little cap sitting atop his head next to his classmates.

He was proud. So damn proud that tears filled his eyes.

Daniel almost hadn't done this. He hadn't wanted to go to college, even community college. He'd nearly given up every cent he and his mother had saved to follow Mr. Miyagi to Okinawa. He'd then tried to spend every cent he'd made in Okinawa on the shop. And it'd been such a rough first year after high school. Trying to find out what he wanted to do and being attacked every time he turned around.

Johnny ended up handing Lucille the camera, hands too shaky, vision blurred. Daniel's name was called and he listened to Lucille click, listened to the roar of their friends, of the applause and shouts of his name, of his classmates he'd been scared of those first few months as he tried to trust people again, unsure who to trust and how. Seeing his smiling face as he got what was most likely an empty case for his diploma from the college president, shaking his hand in the bright sun.

There had been so many sleepless nights, so much stress as Daniel tried to take on everything all at once and refused to give up until Johnny tried to dig him out of the rubble.

Daniel had a degree.

Lucille sniffed, passing the camera to Laura who laughed taking over.

"Oh you two, I got it, don't worry," Laura said and Johnny heard the snapping of photos, the clicks and whirs as his mother took the photos he'd told himself he would take, so they could get them printed, so he could get a small one that he'd stick in his wallet with the other photos. He'd show them at the bar next time he went, to the bartender who always made him a drink that looked alcoholic but never was which Johnny appreciated just like he appreciated Jimmy's cousin who always watered down his beers.

He'd wanted to get those pictures but at least his mother was, with her steady hands while Lucille held his and they cheered Daniel on, watching him turn and smile, big brown eyes on them. A beautiful smile, a beautiful wave before he continued off the stage and to his seat. Back amongst his classmates, ready to listen to the final speeches, waiting to move the tassel, fiddling with the cords he got for good grades and all the hard work he'd put in.

Even if one day Daniel never did anything with his degree. If he decided he wanted to just grow avocado trees on a farm somewhere in the future Johnny was still proud of him, for completing it. For attempting it. For trying and taking the steps he needed to take after Silver and Cobra Kai had tricked him. Going it alone, even though he hadn't always been alone.

After they moved in with his mom, Johnny started going to campus more, making his way there to have lunch, to grab coffee with him. He joined him at dances and went to the shows the school put on with Daniel, going through the flyers of events he brought home and asking Daniel what ones he wanted to do.

Dates.

Even though Daniel was adamant their dates didn't have to include going to campus or doing college things.

But Johnny gently pushed back, because it was a part of Daniel's life, these were the people he was friends with, this was the school he'd picked to go to and Johnny wanted to be there with him along the way even if he wasn't in the classes. He wanted to hold his hand on campus or cheer him on like he always did for soccer games, or just be a part of the crowd with him. Because that's what Daniel had wanted, what he'd asked for when he was sick.

He just seemed to feel bad about asking for it again, so Johnny went for it. Meeting him at bake sales and buying snacks he took to Mr. Miyagi at the shop and sitting next to him in the stands during sports games, not really caring about the game or who was winning but enjoying being in an energetic crowd with Daniel, holding his hand tight.

He'd never been scared to hold Daniel’s hand, never wanted to stop, but living in West Hollywood sort of soothed the whispers in the back of his mind about it. That maybe Daniel felt nervous or uncomfortable. But Daniel sought out Johnny's hand just as much as Johnny sought out his. Their hands automatically reaching for one another while Daniel talked to his classmates or professors.

That had been kind of fun. The first time it clicked for them. The “Oh my god this is why you never want to stay out and party! This is why you didn't want to go to the singles mixers. You've got a boyfriend! How long have you two been dating?”

And while Johnny had originally thought Daniel wanted to avoid that

whole conversation it seemed, more like he wanted to have it so badly and just needed an excuse. And that excuse was Johnny just being here, comfortable and solid at his side. Because Daniel practically glowed. Happy to talk for way too long, longer than comfortable about Johnny, to the point Johnny got embarrassed.

“We met senior year when I moved here. Did not get along but we've been dating for a couple years now, live together even, so yeah that's why I haven't been attending the mixers. He works at the bonsai shop and he's really good with plants. He's a two time All Valley karate champion like me and....”

It never ended. And the fond smiles of his classmates, of his friends when Daniel opened up to them, let them in, trusted them, was precious. And some of the tension in Johnny's chest released. The worry that these people would push him away or be mean just wasn't there. And he felt so lucky, not just for himself, for Daniel too. And then the invites came more and more frequent.

“We're going to this event you should both come.”

He'd definitely showed up on campus to pick Daniel up and waited outside of his class to hear someone call out, “Daniel you should bring Johnny to the party!”

He supposed part of it was if they wanted Daniel to show it'd be easier to invite both of them, more likely it would actually happen rather than Daniel coming home and laying on top of him complaining about the day or hugging him from behind, kissing his neck and being bored.

Though Daniel never stayed bored for long, because boredom was always quickly solved by hands roaming along Johnny's body. A tiny spark that Johnny sometimes instigated, rubbing Daniel's back whenever he laid down on top of him, letting him start to mumble sleepily until his hands went lower and squeezed and Daniel's eyes would turn to him surprised but playful as Johnny grinned at him.

His mom got all the good pictures. Daniel with his classmates, with his professors, with the guys, with Dutch still a little jet lagged but full of playful tugs on the colorful cords Daniel wore teasing the guys if Daniel was smarter than them all.

Photos with Lucille, with Mr. Miyagi standing proudly at his side, with Louie who was visiting and thankfully staying with Nonnia and Nonnio at a hotel.

Photos with Jessica, Kumiko, and Ali. Everyone who'd showed up or flown in to celebrate Daniel. His eyes were glassy and Johnny was standing back, not wanting to tip him over the edge emotionally because he already looked overwhelmed by all the love and care.

And then there was no escape, it was his turn and he went with the flowers first. Daniel took them, studying the flowers for a moment, a soft warm smile on his lips before passing them to his mother with a “hold this for a moment please” and as soon as the flowers left his hands, as soon as the shield was gone Daniel's hands were on Johnny's cheeks cupping his face and pulling him close.

"Are you crying?"

Johnny cleared his throat. "Not right now."

Which was true, he'd managed to stop, hiding somewhat behind his mother as she took photos as he tried to pull himself together.

"Why have you been crying?" Daniel asked, voice soft, searching Johnny's face. "This isn't worth crying over, it's nothing. People graduate every day."

Johnny broke Daniel's grip on his face, easily moving so he pulled Daniel to him, tightly into his arms.

"I don't care about people. I don't care if people graduate every day. You graduated today. And I'm so damn proud of you, okay? Of all the hard work you put in. You graduated and you're going to get a piece of paper and we're going to frame it and stick it up somewhere. You put in the time and the effort and you showed up. You completed something you set out to do and it wasn't easy and I don't care about the rest of them, I care about you. It's not nothing. I'm proud of you, so I'll cry if I feel like it."

Daniel laughed, a little watery and he pulled back, tears in his own eyes.

"I did it," Daniel said softly.

"You did," Johnny said, rubbing away tears. "You kicked ass and now your a badass with a degree."

Daniel laughed kissing Johnny before pressing his head to Johnny's chest, hugging him just as tightly as Johnny was holding him. It took a while to gather themselves again, to wipe away tears and to give

Daniel back his bouquet, for their photos to be taken some more and to head to Lucille's to celebrate.

It was a lot, and Johnny was tired, drained when they got home late that night, carefully putting things away, taking off his suit jacket and feeling the crinkle of the envelope.

Daniel was yawning by his side and Johnny bumped gently into him, a gentle knocking of his shoulder.

"Got you something," he said passing the envelope over.

"What's this?" Daniel asked while Johnny undid Daniel's tie and unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt, carefully removing cuff links and tie pins and setting those aside.

"Open it and find out," Johnny said kissing the tip of his ear.

Daniel opened the envelope and then stared at the tickets for a bit. Then up at Johnny.

"Did you get me in for Trade days?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah, I called around, explained you're in the field, all up and coming and what not and they let me buy tickets for the more exclusive days that aren't open to the public," Johnny said. "I figure if you want, I could be your plus one. But if you want to take someone else that's fine."

"Who else would I take?" Daniel asked. "This is actually perfect because, uh here."

Daniel dug around in his pockets and handed him a business card.

LaRusso Auto West Hollywood with an address and Daniel's information.

"Did you open a shop?"

"Well soon. I just finished setting everything up. I've hired staff and we're all set up for repairs in the garage. Mr. Miyagi's agreed to let me give away bonsai with every car sold. I thought it might be fun and this will actually be a great thing, to go to the LA Auto show and talk to distributors and car manufacturers and...really there's so much to do, this is going to be perfect," Daniel said kissing him.

"I'm so proud of you."

"You keep saying that," Daniel said with a soft laugh.

"Because it's true."

Daniel smiled carefully putting his bouquet in the vase they'd borrowed from Lucille in the center of their table, flanked on either side by their bonsai. His cap and gown thrown over the back of the couch before heading off to the bedroom, Johnny wondering how much energy he had left. Enough for something he was sure. Just enough he hoped.

(A couple years later)

Daniel leaned against the Ford, arms crossed, waiting. He could've gone inside and waited but he didn't want to park and then hike over. He wanted to go. It was a secret. A good secret. A great secret and he was excited that he was the only one who knew. How many times had he been surprised and yet this time it was his turn to be in on the surprise.

The sound of running feet and he held out his arms, bracing himself as Dutch threw himself at Daniel.

"What the hell?" Daniel asked catching the young man.

"It's a test," Dutch said grinning at him. "You promised you'd be able to pick up Johnny, I'm testing your progress," Dutch said squeezing Daniel's shoulder. "Look at you, I'm not touching the ground."

He pinched Daniel's cheeks, squishing his face.

"It's good to see you, actually see you you know, not just hear your annoying voice over the phone droning on and on and on."

"I hate you," Daniel complained.

"Love you too," Dutch said.

Daniel smiled hugging him. "You reek man, What did you do on the plane? Bathe in booze?"

"Oh yeah, some babo on the flight wouldn't leave the flight attendant alone and I got in the way and ended up drenched in wine. So yeah.

Please add shower to the schedule."

"How long have you just been sitting in wine soaked clothes?"

"Oof uh seven hours? I got used to the smell."

"They did nothing for you?"

"I mean I got a bottle of champagne, but I already kind of had champagne, so actually I brought you all a bunch of nice soju's, and maekgoli. My bag is ninety percent souvenirs."

"We still haven't finished with the stuff you brought last time."

"Well hurry up or else your next place is going to need a booze cellar like Jimmy's place."

"You're heavy man, I'm putting you down."

"No! You're doing so well. Carry me everywhere," Dutch said.

"No. I'm glad you're home. I'm happy to see you, but I still need to feel my arms to drive."

"You're no fun," Dutch complained with a pout sighing and moving to put his feet back on the ground, picking up his bags and putting them in the trunk before getting in the passenger seat.

"How are our boys?" Dutch asked as Daniel drove away from LAX.

"Graduating," Daniel said with a grin.

"Finally."

"I mean it's on time," Daniel said.

"Yeah but you already graduated."

"I went to community college."

"Any changes I should know?"

"Not really. I mean according to Tommy and Jimmy we should expect all the graduated sorority girls to return to cheer on Bobby as he walks. So we've got to be extra loud for Jimmy and Tommy."

"They said that?"

"No, Johnny recommended it. Jimmy's family is throwing a big party afterwards, so we're all going there to celebrate."

"How's he and Jenny?"

"Really good."

"So we should be expecting a wedding?"

Daniel frowned looking at the road. He hadn't thought about that. Those two had barely been dating four years and marriage was the next logical conclusion he supposed. Yet Johnny...

"Yeah, maybe."

"And our golden boy?"

"Turning into an old man at a young age. I found him asleep on the couch like a cat enjoying the sunlight coming in."

Dutch burst out laughing. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. It was cute. And it makes sense we went out with the guys to some end of year campus parties throughout the week and he just passed out."

"What is he already a senior citizen?"

Daniel laughed, "Maybe. But he's good. Still co-teaching with Chozen a couple times a week and working at the shop."

"How's apartment number 3?"

"Good, but I want a house."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"And the dealership?"

"Good. Louie's staying with us again and working at the dealership. I'm also making him go to school. He's pissed"

Dutch laughed.

"Really?"

"Yeah I think he wanted to hang out at the dojo the whole time."

"What, he's got a crush on Chozen or something?"

"Oh god I hope not. His parents wanted him to get a degree, so I had him talk to the guys and he's doing a four year program at UCLA."

"Oh I bet he hates you now."

"Kind of. I told him he couldn't just fuck around this time around and he begrudgingly agreed, we had a long awful conversation about how he can't just leave and avoid things by hiding out here. He's got to call home and he's got to work."

"Did you ever find out why he ran away here and then ran away from you?"

Daniel sighed. "Yeah, Johnny was right. He was having a rough time at home and needed a breather. Apparently it was chaos and he felt in the way and overheard his mom say something about how difficult it was to take care of everything and worry about her kids so he thought it'd be better if he wasn't there. So he came here. Something about how I always make living in LA sound cool and like an adventure. Share in the magic or whatever. I was so confused because it's not magic. I got my ass beaten by a karate gang. But I guess because I'm here and Johnny's here he wasn't scared to be here? I guess he finds Johnny calming or something. I guess his sister was having a rough time and all with their dad and was being like…mean on top of everything. Like the way she was hurting I guess was similar to how Chozen grieved. Lashed out a lot and he just felt like he was in the way. That he wasn't wanted around. So he came and hung out with us and I guess Vanessa apologized, the family was getting counseling and more help to manage everything, I think Nonnia and Nonnio went down to help for a bit, so he went home."

"So he's calling home still. His dad seems to be going through a better patch. Like things are looking up I guess? And now he's here because his family wants him to study out here. College, and as much as he complains he's actually studying. I've come home quite a few times to find him sitting at the dining room table with a big stack of books studying next to Johnny, asking him to read over his papers and reports."

"How domestic."

"Yeah, it's actually quite nice and I think Johnny likes it."

"How's Louie doing at the dealership?"

"He's a fucking nightmare," Daniel said with a groan. "He keeps playing tricks on people. I'm about to murder him if he switches the sugar for the salt at our coffee table again."

"You've been having a lot of salty coffee lately?" Dutch asked with a laugh.

"Too many."

"Is he nicer to Johnny at least?"

"Oh yeah, total respect for Johnny, but it's like all his respect for me has turn to rebellion. The best part of my week is when he's at the dojo studying with Chozen. Then at least he's driving someone else nuts."

"Chozen's also drinking salty coffee?"

"No, more like Louie turns on the LaRusso endless chatter on Chozen and Chozen still hasn't figured out how to combat that."

"Poor guy."

"Poor me!" Daniel said. "But, I haven't told Johnny this...but I've been looking at the cars coming out you know?"

"Yeah."

"And the Avanti isn't old really, it's just he's got a one of a kind unique car and he does all the repairs himself and I worry about it. I'm thinking of getting him a car next year."

"Damn Daniel that's a big gift."

"Yeah....but I want him to have something to drive for when the Avanti eventually has to be set aside you know? That's coming up. Like that damn company has gone bankrupt so many damn times that I don't think they've got the parts. And I mean it's a custom one, so they didn't really even have the parts anyway. I spent like a whole month looking for old Studebaker Lark parts because that's sort of how it was frankensteined together right? But that company was also kaput. To the point I was digging around junkyards to see if I could scrounge up spare parts just in case. So it's time. And he's not going to do it. He's not going to buy himself a car. So I've been circling ones

he'd like and I mean I've got all these car magazines lying around all the time and I talk to him about cars all the time so I've been seeing what kind of style he likes and it looks like he's really into the muscle cars coming out so I'm thinking next summer I'll get a few on the lot and get him one."

"It's got to be red. Dude loves his red cars."

"Yeah," Daniel said with a soft smile.

"What about this baby?" Dutch said tapping the dash of the Ford.

"Thankfully Ford probably isn't going anywhere any time soon, unlike Avanti, but this is already a classic and my insurance lady keeps yelling at me about how classics can't be day to day cars if I want to be insured while I drive it. So I already got a new car. Just thought you'd like to get picked up in this one."

"Two new cars huh?"

"Yeah I get now why Mr. Miyagi always drives that damn truck. I love my Ford, but the damn insurance is such a pain. And since we work with insurance when selling cars at the dealership and fixing them up in the garage it's a huge pain to have them be pissy at me specifically."

"Yeah I can see how that'd look bad."

It was not really want Daniel had planned to talk to Dutch about. But it was one of those things that built up that needed to find an outlet of escape and Daniel couldn't stop it on the way to Dutch's mansion, following him in and to his room, sitting on the couch while he showered and changed into something less wine soaked.

"You can stay with us or Ma if you want, Ma said you're more than welcome. I mean you can stay with any of us," Daniel said when Dutch walked past drying his hair.

"I know," Dutch said. "But I want to spend a few days with Mr and Mrs. P." Dutch said. "And I've got to go through my stuff and repack some things for when I go back. Plus my parents said they left a huge stack of documents I gotta sign."

"Seriously?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah I'm a part of the company now even if I spend 90% of my time training in taekwondo."

"Are you in school too?" Daniel asked.

"Soon, but everything is mostly in Korean so it's pretty hard. I'm studying though to take their like version of the SAT's. They only happen once a year and the whole country takes them on the same day, so it’s intense. My sanbonim wants me to go to Yonsei."

"What would you study there?"

"Business," Dutch said with a sigh.

"Can't you study something else if you want?"

"Well I mean I can take cooking classes, but there's not a lot of options at the moment within my language reach. I mean I can hold conversations and travel around super easy, I can hold phone conversations and go to the movies or see performances, but scholarly shit? Not there yet. I'm going to go check on Mr. and Mrs. P, okay? And maybe grab some honey."

Daniel nodded getting up and following Dutch down and out of the mansion and into the conservatory. It was as beautiful as it always was but no peacocks came strutting out no matter how many times Dutch called. Daniel frowned as he held jars that Dutch filled with honey, bees buzzing around, complaining about his peacocks. And then Daniel spotted Mrs. P watching them through the undergrowth.

"There," Daniel said.

Dutch turned slowly and Mrs. P stared.

"Hey, come say hi huh?" Dutch said.

Mrs. P turned her head away from him and disappeared into the foliage.

"Oh they're pissed at me for not being around," Dutch said with a sigh rubbing a hand through his hair. "That's why they're not coming out huh? Well good thing I know they can be bribed."

He wandered over to the gardeners corner, looking around the shelves and pulling out a jar. He shook the jar and nothing happened. He opened the jar and two peacocks jumped out of the bushes and ran straight for Dutch making more noise and commotion then Daniel had ever heard.

Dutch laughed as they flapped their wings and fanned out their tails chirping and squawking at him.

"See, pretend as much as you want that you're mad at me for being gone, but really, you will roll over for any treat," Dutch said setting the treats out and gently running his fingers over their feathers. Beaks started pecking at him but Dutch grinned, like it tickled, like it was their version of kisses and not actual pecking.

"Yeah I'm home for a bit, missed you both too. I'll see you again tonight so don't hide from me okay?"

"Alright," Dutch said looking at Daniel. "Shall we go scare Johnny?"

"Scare?" Daniel asked with a laugh digging his keys out of his pocket.

"Well I want to surprise him, maybe jump up behind Johnny or something and see how he reacts."

"Once upon a time you'd have gotten socked in the face. Now?"

"Well I figure the person whose mostly surprising him is you. I'm curious if he can tell."

"Oh he can tell," Daniel said. "How about we grab lunch and go to the shop?"

"Perfect."

Dutch sneaking up on Johnny, hands covering his eyes was anticlimactic.

"Dutch?"

"How the hell did you know?" Dutch complained, hugging Johnny and complaining into his shoulder.

"You're the only one who wears that aftershave," Johnny said.

"What?"

Daniel burst out laughing, "If we hadn't gone home for you to shower he might not have been able to tell."

Dutch groaned, smacking Johnny's back. "It's unfair, totally unfair, it

was suppose to be a surprise, you were supposed to think I was Daniel or guess and get it wrong a bunch and then when you saw it was me, shriek and say ‘oh my god Dutch you're here? You're finally back? I've missed you so much my heart has ached every moment since we last parted’."

"That's what you want?" Johnny asked with a laugh.

"I wanted something. More than Dutch?" Dutch said with a pout.

"Well whatever you do don't try that on Chozen, you'll end up on the floor."

"Well now I have to try that on Chozen," Dutch said standing up and grinning.

"I said don't."

"It won't hurt, I'll be fine. When's he normally get here?"

"Well that's his car. At least let him put the drinks down before you try to scare him," Johnny said with a sigh.

Daniel sat down next to Johnny, taking his hand and lacing their fingers, kissing his cheek. The chimes clattered as Chozen opened the door, calling out a greeting and setting the drinks down.

Dutch moved quickly hands reaching out to cover his eyes for the surprise but then Chozen caught his hands, twisted to throw Dutch to the ground, eyes widening as he saw who it was.

"Oh shit!" Chozen said, twisting and catching Dutch before he crashed into the ground.

"Why the hell did you sneak up on me?" Chozen asked. "I could've hurt you!"

Dutch grinned up at him, "Eh, you caught me, no harm no foul."

"You could've gotten badly hurt!" Chozen said.

"He looks pissed," Daniel said with a soft laugh.

"For Dutch's safety," Johnny said quietly.

"Shut up peanut gallery," Dutch said. "You at least missed me right? Unlike these heartless bastards right?"

"Hey! That's not what I meant," Johnny said. "I did miss you,"

Chozen frowned looking down at Dutch. He stood carefully, helping Dutch to his feet, righting him, letting go, turning around and leaving the shop.

Daniel burst out laughing, the sound echoing the shop.

"Hey!" Dutch said, "What the fuck? What did I do? Where's Mr. Miyagi? At least he'll be happy to see me."

"Oh come on Dutch I'm happy to see you," Johnny said. "I did miss you, but we also just saw you like 2 months ago."

"Just saw me he says, as if the ocean between us is mere puddles in a rainstorm. Mr. Miyagi! I missed you! Where are you sir?"

"He's in the back," Johnny said with a sigh.

"Well I'm going where I'm appreciated," Dutch said sticking his tongue out as he passed.

Johnny sighed leaning his head on Daniel's shoulder.

"You okay?" Daniel asked looking at the bonsai on the desk.

"Yeah. I know he's just playing, but still, I am happy to see him."

Daniel picked up a pair of bonsai sheers and made a few adjustments before leaning over and kissing Johnny. "He knows that, you know? That you love him just as much as he loves you. And he's happy to be here. He just wants all that pomp and circumstance."

"Isn't that the song they play at graduation?" Johnny asked with a soft chuckle.

"It is!" Daniel said. "Good catch."

"It's a bad joke."

"Yes but it caught your attention and that's all I wanted it for."

"Your baiting me with bad jokes? To what end?"

"To cheer you up. Your tears are cute and I enjoy teasing you but I don't want you to be actually broken hearted because Dutch is home but teasing you too. Cry on me when we get home, but cry because

you want me so badly that you can't think of anything else. Cry tears of joy because I'm giving you what you want but you still want more and don't know how to ask. Cry as you cling to me and beg for more."

"I can't take you anywhere," Johnny whispered, face burning bright red.

"Welcome to confused but horny, it nixes out the blues just a little bit," Daniel said with a grin working on the bonsai.

"What do you mean?" Johnny asked.

"I find it helps anyway," Daniel said. "When I get overwhelmed or upset or bothered by something I change my focus to you. At first it was How would Johnny handle this situation but then I'd start thinking about you a little differently and before long I was just super horny and confused and would go find you and it didn't necessarily fix things but I felt better for the moment and then well sometimes after we had sex I'd feel much better and had worked through it."

"I don't think everyone works that way, but that explains some things. You've accidentally conditioned yourself that sex solves problems, I can't believe it. Isn't the whole point that sex doesn't solve people's problems?" Johnny asked, arm wrapping around Daniel's waist watching him trim the bonsai.

"People yeah but me, solves a lot of my issues. Because why be upset about my grades in school because I've got you under me begging me for attention? Why worry about sales or signing up a new manufacturer for the dealership when your on your knees sucking me off? Why stress about anything when I've already won at life because you kiss me so greedily and grind just enough to drive me wild when we go out dancing at the club that I know when we get home you will taste oh so sweet once I get my mouth on you? And sing so beautifully when I play with you?"

"You're weird but I love you," Johnny said face bright red and burying it against Daniel's neck.

"I love you too," Daniel said.

"AHA! SEE MR. MIYAGI WAS HAPPY TO SEE ME!" Dutch said running back out. "Unlike you who had no response and Chozen who fucking ran away from me! At least Daniel was there to pick me up or else I might feel like no one cared."

"Johnny would've picked you up but you wanted to surprise him," Daniel said. "Stop teasing him, you know he loves you."

Dutch sighed falling dramatically into a stool nearby. "It's just bothering me okay?"

"Chozens back," Johnny said.

"Huh?" Dutch said turning.

Chozen pushed the door open and walked over setting a cup in front of Dutch.

"What's this?" Dutch asked taking it carefully in his hands.

"I got everyone else drinks, but I didn't know you were here. Johnny said you like gas station coffee with three Irish creamers and a hot chocolate packet the best, so I went and got it. Welcome back," Chozen said.

Dutch looked at the cup of coffee in his hands and then back up at Chozen. He set it down carefully on the table and then threw himself at Chozen who caught him with a slight stumble.

"What the hell? Stop doing that!" Chozen said.

"No fucking way, you keep catching me man, I'm going to keep doing it."

"So I should drop you? Logically that means if I want you to stop I shouldn't catch you."

"But you wouldn't, because you missed me."

"Just because I missed you doesn't mean-"

"You care!" Dutch said. "And you know what Chozen, I'm happy to see you too. Missed you as well."

The look on Chozen's face was delightful. A look of horror, of realization, that he was in over his head, regret, and a little bit of acceptance.

"Is this how you greet people now?" Daniel asked with a laugh. " A running jump?"

"Yeah, It's fun," Dutch said, having still not let go of Chozen. "Johnny I

expect you to catch me later."

"I will," Johnny said.

It was kind of nice sitting in the stands, not having any focus on him, holding Johnny's hand. They took photos of the graduation. Johnny using the camera his mom gave him that Daniel used more. For their road trips, for their vacations.

The flowers Johnny had gotten had taken most of the morning to get together. Specific and unique for each guy. School colors mixed in with their favorites and meanings that Daniel enjoyed trying to parse out with the well worn language of flowers guide.

Johnny looked nice in his suit and Daniel may have spent most of the speeches wondering how the buttons would sound if he ripped Johnny's shirt off the first chance he got. Maybe grab him and run to that school library on campus where people, rumor had it, went to have sex.

Johnny could lean against the stacks and hold on to the shelves, shirt open with buttons lost somewhere under the stacks, quietly moaning as Daniel whispered dirty things to him and took his time. Touching him and enjoying a new space since Johnny seemed too reticent to have sex at any of the libraries where he knew the librarians. Like he didn't want to get caught by them but was still interested, somewhat, doing it in a library.

Maybe after they saw the guys they could sneak off. They'd walk across the stage, get their empty diploma holder, shake hands with random people they'd probably never met while in school but were important on some level and then they'd move back to their seats, move the tassels to the other side, cheer, throw their caps and then after it was over they'd take photos, give the guys their bouquets and Daniel would drag Johnny off into the crowd to the library and make him moan into the books until he was begging Daniel for it. And Daniel would give it to him. Everything he had.

He liked that.

Waiting was awful. Now that he had a plan. But he was proud of the guys, he did like trying to out cheer the sorority girls who'd showed up for Bobby. He liked the surprised look Jenny got on her face when there were more cheers for her then she expected. He liked that Dutch

talked Chozen into cheering too. Louder than he'd heard Chozen before. Watching the guys find them and grin, waving.

He liked taking photos of Johnny and the guys after. The way they reacted to Dutch being there, like they were pleasantly surprised. The way they hugged each other all so tight.

"You know you've gotten pretty good with a camera."

Daniel glanced over at Tommy's aunt.

"Oh, yeah, it's pretty fun."

"You took the photos from those road trips you all did to Ohio right? And Japan and Korea?"

"Not all of them but yeah."

"They're good. If you ever get bored, we can always use help on photoshoots. You still have my business card?"

"I do," Daniel said with a soft smile.

She nodded, patting his shoulder and then turning to Tommy holding out her arms. Tommy's uncle was smiling but his eyes were full of tears and he was saying something that made Tommy nod rubbing at his eyes.

Daniel took pictures for them. Watching as the guys were pulled into that photo, the way they hugged Tommy tight.

He knew that feeling. Where the big moments happened and you took a moment to realize who should've been there. It'd happened at their high school graduation too. That wall of grief that Daniel hadn't thought of that snuck up on him. The similar look on Tommy's face as his aunt cupped his face telling him how proud they'd be of him.

It wasn't something they'd talked about. Not frequently. But it was understood. Daniel understood. He started to put the camera down, to reach out, surprised to find Chozen had beaten him to it. Saying something softly, Tommy nodding.

He'd be okay. It'd hurt, it'd change by the day, but he wasn't alone and he seemed to realize that. To know that. And heck if Chozen even knew that Tommy needed careful handling then everything was fine.

"Hey, how about we get out of here for a bit?" Daniel whispered to

Johnny while the guys were taking pictures with their families.

Pictures with them had been taken, group photos had been taken, flowers had been given out. Now the library was singing to Daniel. Begging him to take Johnny there. Johnny glanced at him, studied him for a moment and then nodded.

"Okay," Johnny said.

Daniel grinned. Johnny was going to love this. Sex surrounded by nerdy books. Bobby had said it was around the corner. Towards the back. In a section students didn't go too frequently and the books didn't get checked out too much so the librarians never had a reason to go back there.

It was a nice walk across the campus away from the crowd and through the library and voilà. There it was.

Daniel turned towards Johnny prepared to start phase one of his plan, but Johnny was taking off his suit jacket and hanging it up on the edge of the stack before kissing Daniel. It wasn't the plan but it was fine. Johnny already understood the point. Maybe Bobby had told him about the spot? That saved time.

Daniel ran his hands down Johnny's back, along the silky dress shirt following it to where it was tucked into his dress pants and sliding his hands down and in. Grabbing. Johnny's hands went straight for his belt, for the zipper and buttons, reaching for him as well.

They were on the same page.

Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

Daniel knew that Johnny would be into it, into having sex at a library, out and— wait a second. Where was he going?

Johnny had sunk to his knees and Daniel gripped the shelf tightly as Johnny took him in his mouth. Fuck.

He'd planned everything. All his daydreams had been with Johnny holding on to the shelves until his knuckles were white, trying not to be too loud. He hadn't planned for that to be his own problem. He hadn't even thought of Johnny on his knees sucking him off. It was too hot.

He had to cover his mouth, hope that he wasn't making too much

noise as Johnny bobbed his head and moved his tongue and Daniel tried to focus on him, on the feeling, on enjoying it.

Sometimes when he came home from soccer practice Johnny was curled up on the couch reading and he looked so cute and happy that Daniel wanted to do it right then and there, uncurl him and have some fun, see if he could keep reading, teach Daniel something new. His favorite nerd.

"Johnny," Daniel whispered, he didn't want to come yet. He wanted to keep going. He wanted to hold Johnny close. To be buried deep inside. Though going the slow teasing route he planned wouldn't be possible. Not unless he got real balanced real fast. "Can I stick it in."

Johnny pulled away coughing and laughing.

"What?" Daniel asked.

"Technically what I'm doing— isn't it already in?" Johnny asked grinning up at him.

"From this position all I can do is grab your head and I don't want to do that. I wanna hold you at the same time," Daniel said with a frown resting his head on the shelf, breathing purposefully looking down at Johnny who was touching him without any purpose which was even more frustrating.

A lazy way of moving his hand. The whispering was difficult. Trying to stay quiet was difficult, especially with Johnny studying him and then looking down at his dick with way too much focus. Like he was debating something.

He shifted, searching through his pockets and handing Daniel a condom. Daniel stared at it pushing back from the stacks a little. Then looking at Johnny as he stood up, looking around, making a decision, taking off his clothes.

"Johnny?"

"This is what you had in mind right?"

Not exactly. Somehow it was better. He wanted a picture, but that'd be too loud wouldn't it? In the quiet library.

Johnny carefully setting all his things aside. This was braver, bolder than Daniel had expected and he felt it in his throat, like it was

suddenly hard to swallow because there was skin to look at everywhere.

"How?" Daniel asked, pressing in close, hugging Johnny, his hands running over Johnny's skin, carefully turning him to face the stacks.

"This morning you said 'the guys are graduating, you have no librarians at their library, no love for it. Let's have sex there'."

Had he?

He remembered day dreaming about it as the days led up to graduation. Actually every time he came to campus he thought about how Johnny probably wouldn't do it ever at any of his libraries, but this one was out of his scope. And the guys were leaving, so...oh god he had talked about it that morning, half asleep while cuddling close to Johnny. No wonder Johnny had been on the same page. He'd been blatant.

Johnny was pink, the back of his neck was red, embarrassed, blushing, but not hiding.

Daniel kissed his neck, kissing soft warm skin, as he worked his fingers in with the lube he'd put in his pocket. He'd put several little packets in his pocket. Lube and condoms, but he went with Johnny's, the one Johnny had handed him. Johnny who knew exactly what he wanted but teased him anyway. It warmed his heart, watching him grip the spaces at the end of the shelves. A soft gasp here and there.

"Ready?"

Johnny nodded and Daniel kissed his shoulder, pushing in. It made him think of what could've been. Being in a quiet library. If they'd gone to college together then they could've found time to meet in random places. They could've had lunch together on the green. Daniel would've always known where to find him. In the library with a stack of books, studying hard. And Daniel could've been on one of the teams. They could've studied together again, and Daniel could've tried to secretly jerk him off under the table when he got bored.

It was probably good that they hadn't gone to school together. Daniel wouldn't have made many friends. He'd have run away to find Johnny. To talk to him about everything, about nothing, to kiss him until he was breathless and rock into him until his breathing became uneven until they both saw stars in every darkened semi private corner on campus.

They didn't get caught which was probably a dangerous high and made Daniel wonder what else they could get away with but Johnny walked with a purpose back towards the graduation, like he wasn't going to be deterred. Purposefully walking. Daniel grinned wrapping an arm around his waist, bumping his hip against Johnny's.

"You okay? You're overcompensating as you're walking. That's not your normal gait."

Johnny stiffened. "And whose fault is that?"

"You're the one who gave me a condom."

"Like you didn't have any," Johnny said hand going into his back pockets, searching Daniel's pockets. "I bet you have plenty, somewhere."

"Not there, but I don't mind you looking. Keep going you might find a treat somewhere."

"You sound like a perverted old man."

"I will be a perverted old man one day, but only to you," Daniel said. "Try again, I'll give you a treat if you guess the right pocket."

"How many pockets do you have?" Johnny asked.

"Nine."

"Those odds are awful."

"But a treat is a treat."

"What kind of treat?" Johnny asked.

"A good one."

Johnny studied him thoughtfully, giving his ass a squeeze from the pocket he was currently in. "Well maybe it's a treat anyway."

"And you say I'm the perverted old man."

"You're a bad influence. No one is going to want to visit us when we're old."

"That's fine, as long as you're there that's all I need," Daniel said with a grin watching as Johnny blushed.

He took his hand out of Daniel's back pocket, studying him thoughtfully which was delightful. Daniel loved having those blue eyes on him, focused on him. Even if it was a dumb game. Johnny's hand went to his hip, sliding into his front pocket.

Daniel laughed in delight.

"You going for your own treat? You already had it in you mouth and ass, you want it again?"

"You said I could look in your pockets," Johnny said, his ears were red, but his fingers were still searching under pretense, touching and teasing.

"I'll give you hint. Condoms don't do well in tight spaces like wallets and pockets. I mean inside, yes, but storage, it causes friction," Daniel said.

"I know that," Johnny said.

"So you're picking pockets where you know it's least likely to be on purpose huh?" Daniel asked with a grin.

"Well you have kept them there before."

"Yeah, for short periods. I knew we'd have to sit for hours for the graduation so I didn't put them there."

Johnny pulled away, the warmth, the pressure and weight of his hand leaving and a slight disappointment remaining.

"You can try again," Daniel said.

"Will I still get a treat?" Johnny asked leaning in close, lips brushing Daniel's.

His heart was pounding, he wanted to grab Johnny and go somewhere else. He wanted to find the nearest darkroom and develop the picture he took. He wanted to find a dark corner and go for another round. And Johnny, he was smiling, like he knew, like he knew from Daniel's face that he was driving him wild.

"I thought you were sated," Johnny said. "You seemed like it anyway."

"I can go again."

Johnny sighed, like it couldn't be helped, like he was about to break

terrible news. He kissed Daniel.

"I don't think we can hide away much longer."

He was right and Daniel hated it. Time. He wanted more time. For it to be as slow as his childhood summers. At the start, with everything thick and slow and sweet. But he was right. They had to return to the graduation. To cheer on the guys. To have dinner. It wasn't their day. Instead it was like he'd taken a little pressure off his own shoulders.

He pressed his forehead into Johnny's shoulder.

"I want to go somewhere else with you."

"A trip? Where do you want to go?"

"Nowhere. I just want to see you naked in the sunlight again. You didn't have to take off all your clothes, but that was hot."

Johnny laughed softly. "I didn't want to get them dirty or rip them."

"I wanted to."

"What get my clothes dirty?"

"No, rip them. I wanted buttons to get lost everywhere."

"That again?"

"It's satisfying."

"What the sound?"

"The way the fabric gives and you always make this sound when I do it that I like and then I get to see your skin, I don't know it's like ripping open a present."

"Well...later," Johnny said kissing him gently on the temple. "Now we owe the guys some of our attention huh?"

"Yeah," Daniel said with a pout.

"Why are you frowning? What did we do on your graduation?"

"Partied and then had sex all night long."

"Yeah and apparently graduations now get you going too. We're going

to have to avoid them from now on," Johnny said pulling away and walking towards the festivities.

"Hey, it's not the graduation. It was the chance to do it in a library," Daniel said following after him.

"Sure," Johnny said like he didn't believe him.

"It's not the graduation, it's you, it's the library it's that I thought it'd turn you on and I was right wasn't I?" Daniel asked.

Johnny looked away, paused at the edge of the festivities, Daniel could see their friends.

"I didn't dislike it," Johnny said.

Daniel smiled. He could work with this. He kissed Johnny, leaned in close and whispered in his ear. "If you can figure out which pocket then I'll take you to a bookstore and buy you books, as many as you want. That'll be your treat." Before pulling away and waving towards the guys.

He glanced back seeing Johnny processing, shocked, flustered, a bit of that spark of competition, determination.

He grinned.

Johnny was going to be hands on and it was going to be great. Daniel couldn't wait. He'd tease him. He'd buy him books no matter what. But the more chances he took the less he'd buy.

That'd be the game.

He was excited. Excited to take Johnny to a bookstore and see his face. They'd gone to the library, he went to the library all the time, but he never seemed to buy himself books. Like he just couldn't get over it, like it was a luxury he wouldn't buy himself. So Daniel was going to do it.

"Hey!" Jimmy said arm wrapping around Daniel's shoulders. "I've got a question for you."

"Congratulations again," Daniel said. with a smile.

"It's step one," Jimmy said with a sigh leaning his head against Daniel's in an exhausted manner. "I've got to get my P.H.D. I got to pass all my tests, it sucks. But step one done. And actually there's a step two that's

kind of a surprise. Um so this is a secret," he lowered his voice and whispered, hand cupped around Daniel's ear. "I've decided that after the LSAT, when Jenny and I pass, I'm going to ask her to marry me."

"What?" Daniel asked more out of shock then a need for clarification.

"Yeah. I mean it's not right now, but I wanted to let you know, because if she says yes I want to take Johnny away for a weekend."

"What for?" Daniel asked.

"I'm going to ask him to be my best man. I figured we'd go and I'd ask him then. You going to be okay without him for a weekend...in like maybe October of next year?"

"Yeah. I mean we're not glued to the hip," Daniel said.

"You say that and yet..." Jimmy said with a grin hugging Daniel. "Man I'm so fucking excited."

Married.

Jimmy was getting married?

Daniel smiled, hugging him back but when Jimmy left his side it settled a little weird in his stomach. Like a block of ice.

Jimmy was the first to get married and Johnny was going to be the best man?

Jimmy was talking to Johnny animated and Johnny was nodding and smiling. A secret surprise. Johnny would go on a trip, a fun trip with his friend and not know until they go there.

It was sweet. Even if it was nearly a year off. Even if there was a chance for a no.

But it felt...a bit like how one his aunts complained when she got drunk about how much it'd sucked to be the eldest sister and her little sisters getting married first. You're happy for them but then it casts a big shadow on your own life. Like Johnny and Daniel had been together longer...but they couldn't.

Could they?

He tried to push it from his mind. He was happy for Jenny, for Jimmy, for the guys. But it was like a dark weight, an anchor he hadn't

noticed keeping him from keeping up with them.

They'd marry. They'd have kids. They'd buy a house and get a picket fence. And...

Johnny hugged him from behind, palm pressing to Daniel's chest, slipping beneath his jacket. There was a slight sound as Johnny's hand went in the hidden pocket inside of his suit jacket.

"Will you really buy me books?" Johnny asked.

"That could just be candy," Daniel said looking back at him.

"I know what a condom feels like," Johnny said with a laugh. “Besides when have you carried candy in your pockets?”

"I might one day. But yeah I'll buy you books," Daniel said. "Let's go later okay?"

"Okay," Johnny said smiling warmly kissing his cheek.

Daniel congratulated the guys, enjoyed the warmth and familiarity of being with his friends, of their dinner, of spending time together, of watching them cry and hug Dutch who laughed and grinned but Daniel caught the tears in his own eyes. Of watching Bobby's little siblings, no longer quite so little, run around enjoying the party, of the food everyone made, of meeting extended family members who smiled and welcomed Daniel like an old friend, an old family member they hadn't seen in a long long time. Part of everything, someone they knew from stories.

And Jenny. Jenny hugged him warmly, was just as welcoming, just as happy to see him. And he couldn't imagine her saying no. He couldn't be mad at her or at Jimmy. That life was unfair. That the world wasn't as nice as this little bubble they were in. Because she welcomed him, loved him, just as much, saving him the last piece of cake, whispering to him little secrets and jokes like they were the oldest of friends.

He was happy. Happy to be there amongst them all. Happy to watch his friends succeed, to move forward in life. Knowing they had worked so hard. Laughing when the girls showed up, in small groups to congratulate Bobby, who turned red because he kept getting kissed with his parents nearby. A mess of different colored lipsticks.

A tidal wave of love.

It was nice to float along in it all. With Johnny nearby smiling and talking and holding his hand.

In the morning Daniel asked Johnny for directions to a good bookstore, didn't matter if it was close or not, as they sat together having brunch at a diner they liked. Like his mother Johnny liked to share breakfast. Something fun that was sweet and something savory. A nice mix with a coffee full of cream and sugar.

It was fun to drive him to the bookstore, listening to him give directions. He watched Johnny move towards the store then stop and pause and look back. Like he wasn't sure. Like he didn't know what to do. Like whatever it was that stopped him from buying books settled like a weight on his shoulders again.

How many books did Johnny actually own?

Ten? Maybe.

If he didn't count the ones his mom filled the shelves with at her place in Johnny's room. It was too few for a bookworm. And they were all well loved and well worn. Like the language of flowers book.

"I insist," Daniel said kissing Johnny's ear. "I'll carry them."

Johnny still didn't move.

Daniel pushed him gently towards the store. "At least show me around huh? Since we're here?"

That got him moving and they went in. It smelled like books, new ones that hadn’t been cracked open yet. Fresh ink from the printers.

Johnny showed him the books on cars, on business, on karate and then like he was drawn by something he wandered off, curiously through the stacks, taking a look.

Daniel had prepared himself mentally for a marathon. Like going shopping with his family back in Newark. Exhausting and boring. But watching Johnny move through the stacks, focused, brought back the image of him naked, trying to be quiet, holding on tight to the bookshelves.

And whenever he managed to shake off that memory Johnny just

seemed...peaceful.

Happy. Pulling books from the shelves reading the backs and putting them back.

Wait. Why was he putting them all back?

Daniel covered Johnny's hand with his over a book he was putting back.

"Do you not like this one?"

Johnny looked at him. "It's not that I don't like it. But owning it.... I don't know."

"It's okay," Daniel said moving closer, stepping into Johnny's space. Close enough to smell his aftershave. The detergent they used, the cologne Johnny liked. and to feel the warmth of him through his clothes. "I didn't give you a limit. Try me. You don't have to be picky."

"What if I hate it?"

"That's fine," Daniel said moving his fingers to slip them between Johnny's, pressing his finger tips against Johnny's palm. "Grab the books you want to try."

Johnny nodded, pulling the book from the shelf again.

"I'll hold it," Daniel said taking it from him. "Give them all to me. I'll follow you around and carry them. Like a cute school date. Let me carry your books for you Johnny."

"What will you get out of this?" Johnny asked.

He didn't seem mad, or upset, just curious and Daniel smiled. "I get to watch you and fall deeper in love, and by following along behind you I can enjoy the view."

Johnny blushed lightly leaning forward to kiss him. "I love you too."

Daniel grinned. "I know now. Go forth and pick more books."

Johnny nodded and moved through the bookshelves through the sections studying books, reading the backs. He still put some back but he also added books to Daniel's arms. A wide array. Classics, fiction, poetry, books on plants and flowers, design, cookbooks, science fiction, fantasy, romance, a little bit of everything. And then he turned

and looked at Daniel and the stack of books in his arms and seemed stunned.

"That's too many," Johnny said rushing back to him. "I'm sorry I wasn't paying attention, I'll put some back."

Daniel turned, twisting out of his way, hugging the stack. "Nope, I'm carrying these and I'm buying them."

"But Daniel, books are expensive."

"Is that it?" Daniel asked looking back at him.

"Huh?"

"Is that why you never buy books?"

"It's a luxury and-"

"You yourself said that we can afford a few luxuries."

"Yeah, but-"

"No buts. You like flowers, flowers don't last forever Johnny, their beauty is fleeting and yet you buy me flowers all the time. Those are a luxury, but a luxury we both love. Books bring you joy and you should enjoy a luxury every once in a while. You should enjoy things you like. And these books are new. You never get new books for yourself. To keep. You borrow books from the library because, what, you can't spend the money on yourself? That's okay. Then I will. We'll do this every once in a while, we'll come here if you want and you can look around for new treasures, so find some more Tesoro."

Johnny flushed red and Daniel grinned. He'd never called Johnny a nickname. But it fit. Johnny was his treasure. And Johnny had spent enough winters with his family, enough time to know what it meant. And it settled like it was easy. Perfect.

Daniel smiled following him through the store as Johnny got more books. "If it's too heavy," Johnny said softly, ears burning still. "We can let them hold it at the front desk."

"Not yet," Daniel said with a smile.

If it did, he'd take it to the front, but he liked it. It was a fun way to test his strength. How many books did Johnny weigh? When would he be strong enough to carry him too?

He had a goal. He was working on it and he'd gotten better. He could pick up Dutch. And soon, soon he'd sweep Johnny, his tesoro, off his feet.

He liked the idea of it, the taste of it on his tongue. Daniel turned to look at the shelves. There was a section they hadn't gone down. There was a book his older cousins used to giggle about. He wanted it.

"Johnny, I'm going to pick up a book too. For us."

"Which one?" Johnny asked following him.

"I'm not sure yet, but I think you can help me pick one. Since my hands are full."

Johnny nodded, following him down to the aisle then turning bright red.

"You want one of these?"

"Yeah, there's supposed to be pictures right? Which one looks like something we can do?"

"You want a sex guide?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

Johnny picked up one, flipping it open and held it out to Daniel who studied the positions. It was a man and a woman, some of it was doable but some wasn't. He shook his head, that one wasn't it. Johnny grabbed another, slowly turning redder.

Daniel went with the fifth one and Johnny added to the pile. Enough positions and information about sex and health and lasting longer that seemed applicable for anyone that would sate his curiosity at least for the moment. There was even a section on different cultural practices he was curious about. He'd add to the jar.

They left with four bags of books. Johnny insisted on helping him carry them to the car and Daniel relented because it was too awkward holding all the weight by the handles of the bags that cut and dug into his palms. He couldn't evenly distribute it anymore.

"Thank you," Johnny said when they put the last of them into the trunk, kissing him ever so sweetly.

"We'll build a library," Daniel said with a warm smile. "Slowly."

Johnny smiled and Daniel couldn't wait. Couldn't wait to see Johnny go through his books like a kid at Christmas when they got home, flipping through the pages excitedly and knowing that was because of him.

Chapter End Notes

"In 1984, West Hollywood became one of the first pro-gay municipality regions in the country, with traditions and their recognition of acceptance recognized by locals and visitors. In 1985, West Hollywood was the first city to create a same-gender domestic partnership registration for its residents, as well as to offer same-gender domestic partner benefits for city employees." (Wikipedia)

I wanted them to live in a LGBTQ+ friendly neighborhood for a bit at least and it seemed perfect since one of the locations for LaRusso Auto from Cobra Kai is West Hollywood. It's also closer to UCLA campus then Reseda so I thought it'd be nice for them to hang out with the guys more frequently.

Daniel essentially graduated early because he worked so hard with honors. You get cords in the USA if you're on the Dean's list and your GPA is high enough. Aka he did well.

The Trade Days tickets is also part of LA's auto show, so essentially a convention for Daniel to go and learn about cars and new cars that's been happening for a long time in LA and a chance to meet and interact with people similar. Another conference but car geared and specific.

Asterisk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jimmy had invited Johnny out on his own and wouldn't say where they were going. He'd showed up, asked Johnny to pack and apologized to Daniel, thanked him again, before shoving Johnny and his bag out the door and into his car.

A surprise. A good surprise he said.

They drove north, listening to rock music along the way while Johnny tried to solve the mystery set out before him. Where were they going?

They were taking the I-5. That meant Santa Clarita, except...they passed Santa Clarita and only stopped for snacks at a gas station and to get coffee.

They kept going north. Staying on the I-5. Maybe Bakersfield?

No. They didn't turn off. Which meant they weren't going to Fresno either unless Jimmy was taking a different route.

"Just enjoy the ride," Jimmy told him with a smile. "Relax, eat your corn nuts and chill."

Johnny sighed eating his corn nuts and watching the road. Maybe San Jose or San Francisco, or Sacramento but why?

Johnny studied Jimmy wracking his brain. He should've had some guesses and he felt awful not knowing. He'd been in his own little world for so long, focusing on Daniel and helping Mr. Miyagi with the shop. Focused on helping Louie Jr. and Chozen, on Dutch being gone and trying to keep up with everyone overseas that he'd neglected his friends at home.

"I'm sorry," Johnny said.

"Huh? For what?"

"Not keeping in touch."

"We've kept in touch. We eat dinner together like every other week

man."

"But we still don't see each other as much as we used to."

"True," Jimmy said. "But that happens. We were all at UCLA while you were in Reseda. When you guys lived in West Hollywood for a couple of years that was easier. But we didn't all go to the same school. If we did… college isn't the same man. Bobby, Tommy and I saw each other for lunch and for dinner but we didn't have the same classes much after we finished the gen ed ones. The campus is too big to run into each other between them. We made it work, just like you make it work. Plus, when you're in a relationship, that person you want to spend a lot of time with becomes the focus of your time. Right?"

"Yeah."

"I mean it helps that we all know and get along with Daniel but like you guys have an apartment and full time jobs and are like adult adults with lives and responsibilities and what not you couldn't like run down to UCLA and go on a drinking binges with us, or like come to a kegger all the time. It's not the same. But I think it's okay because we know that if we need you you're there. And if you need us, you know we're there, right? Even if we don't talk every day or every week or every month, we know that we're there for each other when it's important."

"Is that what this is?" Johnny asked.

Jimmy looked at him startled and then broke out into a grin. "I'm not going to tell you. You gotta wait, because I have this whole plan and I'm not going to ruin it but letting you try and solve this mystery early. Patience."

Johnny nodded watching the scenery pass, marking off places and possibilities as they traveled asking Jimmy about school, about his cousin, about the family business. Even though he'd known for a long time that Jimmy didn't want to take over he knew it was still important to Jimmy that despite all the pressure his family heaped onto him that he still cared and loved them, he just wanted to be free, and that it was easier now to talk about them with that approved distance. Jimmy talked about the weird laws he was learning about, local and across the country and international.

"In Arcadia peacocks are considered citizens you know? So like if Dutch took Mr. and Mrs. P out that way they'd have the right away when it came to traffic," Jimmy said with a laugh. "Or there's this

town where you have to own two cows in order to be allowed to wear cowboy boots. I always thought the fashion police were fake. There's also one in Arizona where you can't let your donkey sleep in your bathtub, why that's a thing I don't know but I bet it's a funny story. There's also a couple countries where you can't fly a kite."

Oakland.

They were going to Oakland.

They'd made the turn off onto the exit and it was starting to get dark as Jimmy pulled up at a hotel.

A nice hotel.

Their room was too nice.

A suite with extra rooms that Johnny carefully set his bag in before walking towards the balcony and looking out taking in the view.

He turned towards Jimmy and raised and eyebrow.

Jimmy just smiled. "Let's grab dinner and then get some sleep. I'm exhausted."

"I would've driven."

"Yeah, I know," Jimmy said with a grin heading back to the door.

Johnny followed him through the hallways and to the elevator down and back to the street.

"Not to make you homesick for Daniel but I figured we'd eat Cioppino tonight and try the crab tomorrow."

"Cioppino?" Johnny asked.

"It's an Italian fish stew. And the crab is currently in season, it's Dungeness crab."

"What do you want?" Johnny asked suspiciously.

Jimmy laughed throwing an arm around him. "Nothing much I hope. But patience still."

The food was good. He wondered how much Italian food he hadn't had. He wondered if Daniel would've liked it, if he'd ever had it. What

other Italian foods could they try together?

Jimmy was talking about LSAT, about what a pain it was to have to take a big test in order to get into another school. But he and Jenny were doing it together and it was nice. But he bet Johnny understood that. Understood how nice it was to just spend time with the person you love.

They walked around after dinner, heading back to the hotel and Johnny stared at the phone.

He wanted to call Daniel.

Was it too late?

Fuck it.

He was going to call.

If Daniel was asleep maybe he'd stay asleep and Johnny would just leave him a message.

It rang once.

"Hello?"

"Daniel-"

"Tesoro."

Johnny felt his face burn. He wasn't sure when Daniel decided on keeping that pet name, but it was embarrassing. He didn't dislike it but it made his heart pound every time. It reminded him of every time Daniel gently held him and whispered sweet nothings about how much he meant, how he wasn't just his winnings or his failures but a person that Daniel treasured.

He couldn't get used to it.

"We're uh, in Oakland, We had Cioppino for dinner," Johnny said quietly.

How did people normally check in?

He felt awkward like he was reporting his day, talking to some sort of digital diary. But it was Daniel. And the guys always did it.

Every night they spent away from home they called home to their families and Johnny never had. And then he was always home so he hadn't really needed to. When they'd traveled he'd sent postcards to his mom instead. But Daniel talked about how he worried that Johnny would run away on him, just silently leave and never tell him, disappear and not come home. Which didn't even cross his mind. He was so happy where he was with Daniel in their apartment, whichever apartment they were in, at the shop, with his friends and family, getting tacos at Abuela's, all of it.

"Was it good?" Daniel's voice sounded a little breathy.

Had he run to catch the phone?

"Yeah."

Johnny didn't know what else to say. How he felt.

"I just wanted to hear your voice," Johnny said. "I think we're going to bed soon, might just watch TV. No clue what we're doing tomorrow. Jimmy refuses to tell me."

He felt nervous. At least a little but it was nice, hearing Daniel's voice. Knowing he was there.

"How was your day?"

He heard Daniel laugh, listened to him talk about his day and settled in on the bed, listening. It was like when Daniel went on his trip, how far away he'd gone and then they'd talked so much, so frequently and Johnny had loved it. If he closed his eyes it was like Daniel was there with him, holding his hand and it was lovely. It was perfect, and when he said good night some of the tightness in his chest was gone. He focused on that warmth while Jimmy called Jenny and he took a shower and went to bed.

In the morning Jimmy woke him up, drumming on his chest in a playful way and grinning.

"Let's get breakfast and walk around a bit."

"Okay," Johnny said getting up and dressed.

They got waffles and Jimmy talked and Johnny listened and it was nice.

Jimmy was right. When was the last time he'd hung out with the guys one on one?

He'd done it all the time when he was younger, wanting to make sure he didn't fade away in the first group of friends he had, working on making sure all his bonds were strong so he wouldn't get left behind like he assumed would inevitably happen.

"I'm happy for you man," Jimmy said sipping on his coffee.

"Yeah?"

"I mean I've never seen you call someone before like that you know? And then I realized how fucked up that is that like maybe the last time I saw that was maybe Ali and it wasn't even the same. Ali was more...I don't know you liked her and all but you didn't...she wasn't family," Jimmy said.

Johnny looked at his waffles, the corned beef and hash to the side with the sunny side egg.

Family.

A person to call and let them know you got somewhere safely. A person to call and say good night to and talk about nothing and everything. Even if Johnny couldn't think of anything to say or didn't have much to say Daniel always had enough for both of them. Like he was overflowing in it.

It wasn't like the first couple of times he'd called Ali and wrote down a list of topics, things to talk about to seem interesting.

He wasn't trying to impress Daniel anymore.

Or he was, but not in basic things.

It was...nice. He wasn't on all the time, on display, on center stage, in the lime light trying to prove himself.

Instead....he just ‘was’ and he could impress Daniel with dumb shit like flicking the bottle cap off the old fashioned sodas they had and the root beer his mom brought over and trying to teach Daniel how to do it.

Daniel hadn't mastered it yet but he was trying.

Or just doing push ups while they were watching TV and jerking his

head to tell Daniel go ahead, get on and feeling his comforting weight on his back. Or making dinner and fixing things around the apartment.

"I like calling him."

"Yeah?"

"What about Jenny?"

"I like calling her too," Jimmy said with a smile.

He wasn't going to say anything was he?

Whatever the purpose of their trip was, Johnny was just going to have to be patient. It was a little frustrating. But he could be wait.

They walked around for a bit more and then as the afternoon wore on Johnny found himself in the midst of a big crowd.

Jimmy's arm hooked through his pulling him along up towards security guards who smiled at him and gave him passes on lanyards.

"Here you go Johnny. Ready?"

"For anything I suppose," Johnny said putting the lanyard around his neck and following Jimmy through the door.

Backstage passes.

"Can I ask where we are?" Johnny asked.

"Oakland Coliseum," Jimmy said and Johnny followed him past all the busy people getting ready. "I got us a good spot to see it."

"To see what?"

"Day on the Green." Jimmy said.

Day on the Green. Oakland Coliseum.

"Baseball game?"

Jimmy laughed, tugging on Johnny's arm and pulling him closer, arm around his shoulder. "Nah man. Cooler than that. Because okay, you know I was nervous before when I asked her but shit I'm nervous asking you too."

Johnny stared at Jimmy, he was smiling, excited, but still nervous.

"You need a kidney?" Johnny asked.

"What? No! Oh shit, those are the lights that tell us it's starting soon. Come on lets go to our spot," Jimmy said pulling Johnny along and into the front row.

A few chords played and Johnny turned his gaze to the stage then back at Jimmy.

"Wait. What?"

"Day on the Green," Jimmy said with a smile. "Lots of rock bands."

"Okay, hurry up, what do you want?" Johnny asked turning to Jimmy as he began feeling the music reverberate in his bones and lungs.

"I asked Jenny to marry me."

"And?"

"She said yes!"

"Congratulations. Now why the hell am I here?" Johnny asked.

"Listen to the music. Enjoy it. I'll tell you when it's quieter."

Johnny frowned but as the music drowned out any other conversation he turned back to it. Back to the stage, listening to the sound, the songs.

When had he last gone to a concert? With Ali? Oh that was so fucking long ago now. Everything felt so long ago.

Jimmy was getting married.

It felt overwhelming. Everything was overwhelming. The music, life, how much time had passed.

Jenny was a nice girl and Jimmy was happy.

So fucking happy.

Jimmy, by his side singing along with the music, totally out of key but happy anyway and Johnny felt tears prick his eyes.

He missed his friends.

Those paths they were on, were branching further away. Not terribly. But Dutch was in Korea and the guys had graduated and moved on and Jimmy was going to walk down the aisle and have pretty flowers and get a house, and he'd be a lawyer and he'd have a bunch of kids and kids took up so much time.

When would Johnny see him again?

He blinked back tears and sang along, grinning so hard his face hurt because Jimmy wanted this to be something. What Johnny didn't know, but something and he'd ensure whatever it was would happen.

Jimmy deserved that much.

And Johnny…he'd rebalance eventually.

He'd figure it out. Because like Daniel had said at the lake house, they were in each others lives for life, even if they didn't see each other often. Not every day like they had in high school.

There was a drunken buzz in Johnny's limbs from dancing and standing for so long in one area, as they meandered their way back to the restaurant Jimmy had booked for dinner. Somewhere to try the local Dungeness crab.

Johnny set down his things, t-shirts Jimmy got him, that matched ones Jimmy got himself. Soft band t-shirts. They sat inside because it was cooler then it was down in the Valley and Johnny waited, trying the crab dishes Jimmy ordered, risotto and a mac and cheese that made him homesick for Daniel.

"Okay," Jimmy said after a while. "I prepared a speech."

"A speech," Johnny repeated studying Jimmy.

Was he...breaking up with him?

No, that didn't make any sense.

Friends broke up but not...Jenny wasn't that type of girl. And Johnny couldn't think of anything he'd done that'd make her tell Jimmy that they couldn't be friends any more.

Jimmy took a deep breath and then smiled.

"I brought you here to ask you a favor, but first I want to explain why I'm asking the favor. Why you. I want you to know you're not the only one I'm roping into this. I'm going to make Dutch pitch in too. Drag him back from Korea and put on a suit too. But there's only one position that's really got the biggest to-do. Right so. Johnny, will you be my best man at my wedding? I'm going to ask the guys to be groomsman but I want you to be my best man. And yeah I thought I'd get that confused look.

“Johnny you realize that I'm getting married because of you? Like not because of you because of you, but because when we were studying karate together and I was all confused and didn't know what I wanted to do and I thought I was fucking drowning under the pressure of family business and trade and shit I didn't care about, you kept me afloat. You took me to bookstores and you brought books for me to borrow about anything and everything I expressed even the littlest amount of interest in.

“You went with me to tour places and learn what they did with their lives. What went into a firehouse or found out what a marine biologist did. I mean I'd be fucking miserable if it wasn't for you. I'd have done business school and international business and I'd be bored out of my mind. Law...law is better for me. And because of you I met Jenny. I mean the circumstances are total shit. Sid was a total shit show and he deserves to be rotting in hell but we won and I got to try being a lawyer, I got to see what went into it all first hand and I met Jenny. And I got the courage to spend more time with her, to hang out with her and we started dating and you know she likes you.

“You made her feel welcome. Chatting with her when she was by herself at my families party at my place because my parents needed to talk to me. She knows I love you and the guys and Daniel and she loves you all too. All of you dorks. Like I do. You've had my back all these years and I just...I mean maybe weddings aren't your thing, but I'd appreciate it if you'd have my back again, when I marry her."

The tears Johnny had fought off earlier came swarming back and he rubbed at his face.

"Johnny? You okay?" Jimmy asked softly, moving his chair closer and hugging him.

"I thought you were going to break up with me."

"Why on earth-nah dude you're stuck with me," Jimmy said holding him close. "I want you to be there. For every dumb moment you can make it to. I expect if we have kids you to be on diaper patrol. I mean I trust you before like Dutch. You and Bobby are first up to bat with kids. Because you both actually have experience. You all get to be uncles when that happens. She wants a few. But that's a few years off. First I want you to help make sure I get down that aisle you know? Best man's the leader of the pack so it can't be anyone but you. I mean if you'll do it."

"Yeah," Johnny said softly. "I'll make sure it goes well."

"You will? There's so much we've got to do. Weddings are such a pain. It's a huge task."

"I know," Johnny said softly. He'd have to find his binder. "I'll help you find everything."

Jimmy slid to his side of the booth, hugged him close rubbing his back letting out a sigh of relief. "Oh thank god. I don't know why I was so fucking nervous about it. But I was. Almost as nervous as when I popped the question after we got our LSAT results back."

"Before we head back tomorrow," Johnny said.

"What do you want to do? We can do anything you want."

"I want to get some more of this mac and cheese to take home to Daniel," Johnny said pointing to the dish. It'd been good. Daniel would like it.

Jimmy burst out laughing. "Of course. We'll get some to go. Daniel knows by the way. I told him my plans when we graduated. But the guys don't know yet. So give me like a week or two to let them all know."

"Where are you taking them?" Johnny asked as Jimmy reached for his food.

"Nowhere. Just taking them out to dinner."

"No concerts?"

"Nope this was just for you and I."

Johnny smiled softly at his food, listening to Jimmy talk fondly about

Jenny. About the plans they had so far, what they needed help with, what they were struggling with. And Johnny tried to think of where he'd put that binder. The one he once put together for Sid, with a different wedding in mind. One where all the stuff in it had been a huge waste of time. But maybe he could repurpose it, use it for something new, to make Jimmy happy.

Johnny was drunk. He hadn't meant to but there were so many things to cheer.

Jimmy was getting married!

Jimmy had passed the bar! He'd gotten a good job that he seemed excited about.

Dutch was home!

They kept cheering and Johnny kept downing shots that burned his throat and made his eyes sting.

He'd planned the night.

He should've known that he'd end up a mess. But he was still trying to focus.

He was still in charge.

They were in Las Vegas because that's what Jimmy wanted. He wanted to see the shows and so they'd seen the shows. They'd eaten at the fancy buffets and made small bets at poker tables.

He'd made them leave their wallets behind, giving everyone a set amount of money to use. That way none of them would bet away their pants because they were so damn drunk.

It wasn't that he didn't trust the guys. He trusted his guys. But there were other people he was in charge of.

Jimmy's classmates and friends from law school, from other schools, his cousins, Jenny's brothers. Random childhood friends. And Johnny had to keep them all under control.

Thankfully the guys and Daniel helped keep everyone together, herding their group along.

He was grateful he wasn't alone with all these people he didn't know particularly well. He supposed he could rely on Jimmy's cousins, that they could hold their liquor, but they should have fun. Not pay attention to the fact one of the law bros kept flirting with the waitress who clearly wasn't interested and having to distract him every time she came over so she could work and he'd miss her.

The magic kit Daniel had got him last winter was surprisingly handy at distracting drunk lawyers. He hadn't caught on yet, it was still working, but it was exhausting.

And he and Daniel had such a extravagant room that Johnny half expected a lecture on "special occasions" but it never came. And now he was drunk. His skin buzzing and warm and he felt a little cloudy.

He'd coordinated the party with the maid of honor. To make sure there wasn't an overlap between groups. They'd gone to Mexico. He was pretty sure they'd seen a drag show in LA before they'd flown out to drink and enjoy time on a beach. They'd left a couple days earlier than the guys had.

That had also sounded like fun. He hadn't been to a drag show since they'd lived in West Hollywood. He missed the atmosphere there. Seeing all the other people like him, like Daniel. Just out and about living their lives.

But Jimmy hadn't been to Vegas, wanted a guys trip to Vegas.

So there they were.

Johnny kept looking at the 24 hour wedding spots.

He kept watching drunk couples getting hitched. Eloping. And he felt like a moth to a flame.

He wanted to poke around, to look in.

He cheered again, another toast, another clink of shot glasses.

To Jenny!

To Jimmy!

To a long life of matrimony!

To kids and a house with a picket fence!

And Johnny felt a little queasy.

He hugged his friends.

Good strong hugs.

The kinds the kids always told him they liked.

He missed those kids.

But they were happy where they were.

Sent him postcards and letters from Texas.

He figured it'd stop eventually.

They didn't need him anymore.

His friends were growing up.

They were living a life he'd wanted.

He loved them. He loved them very much.

"We love you too man," Tommy said.

"You going to be able to get to your room okay?" Bobby asked.

Johnny nodded standing, stumbling a little and heading out to the strip.

Daniel had left to call his mom, had bowed out early, which was fine.

Totally fine.

Johnny understood.

Besides, it was nice to just be them. The five of them as the others had dispersed to play games or go to the stripper shows that Jimmy was adamant he didn't want to see.

The five of them cheering to memories of times on motorcycles and dumb Halloween costumes and all their adventures.

But he missed Daniel.

He wanted... He wanted a lot.

Too much.

He kept eying a chapel.

He was by himself.

He could just go look.

Curious.

It hadn't been on the main strip.

Where had it been?

He wandered a little.

Las Vegas was so busy on the strip.

Loud, crowded, bright.

But ah, there it was.

He took a deep breath.

He'd just go in and look.

The door was open.

When had he last been in a church? His mothers wedding? One of the weddings Sid made him attend in itchy suits?

No.

Bobby had had a thing at a church recently.

He'd gone to that.

He sat down in one of the pews.

There was a couple, giggling, unable to keep their hands off one another talking with a priest. He was smiling as well.

Johnny sat and watched.

One couple.

Two couples.

Five.

It never ended.

Men and women coming in, leaving hitched.

Eloping.

Some with friends, some just the two of them.

A few asked him to be a witness. He signed when they asked, because he was there.

"You in town for a wedding?" The officiant asked during a lull.

"Bachelors party."

"Ah, You thinking of getting married?"

Johnny blinked out of the fog of booze. "Uh yeah."

"When?"

"I don't know. I don't think I can."

"Anyone can get married. You can just bring her here if you want. Could be married tonight."

"You said anyone," Johnny said leaning back from where he'd been leaning forward, arms folded over the row in front of him looking at the flowers and turned to the priest. "But you also said her. Which means I can't. Not here anyway."

"We've been helping young couples get married since the forties. Without having to wait, especially in times of war, we've always been a refuge. Of course you can get married here."

"Can I marry a man?" Johnny asked.

"Oh," the priest said.

"Yeah," Johnny said trying his best not to let all of his unhappiness show. That everyone, anyone, had an asterisk, and it excluded him and Daniel.

"How long have you been together?"

"We've known each other since senior year of high school. We've been by each others side since January 1985," Johnny said.

They hadn't started dating yet, but they'd been next to one another for so long. What felt like so long.

The man next to him sighed. "That's a long time."

"Yeah."

"And you love him?"

"Very much."

"I wish I could marry you. I could do the ceremony but you wouldn't get the paperwork. You would get the rights that that entails."

"I know," Johnny said softly, head bowed looking at his hands.

That was the thing he was worried about. He'd heard so many horror stories from their friends when they lived in West Hollywood. Being barred from the side of a loved one in emergencies.

"Sometimes," the preacher said softly. "The people who come here have just met. They're gambling and I wish them all the best. I decided to do this because my parents hadn't been able to marry wherever they wanted until 1967. I wanted to make sure that anyone could and they were the first couple I married. Cried through the whole thing. I thought everyone's view was too narrow, but my own view is still too narrow."

Johnny nodded around the lump in his throat.

"I hope you get to marry him."

"Me too," Johnny whispered.

"Johnny!"

He looked up at the guys.

"What are you doing here? Why are you crying?"

"Am I?"

"Bachelor party?" the preacher asked.

"Yeah."

"Who am I congratulating?"

"Uh me," Jimmy said.

Arms wrapped around Johnny in a hug.

"Why are you here?" Johnny asked looking up at Tommy as the guys sat down around him in the pews.

"You think, after being your friend since before high school we can't tell, even plastered drunk, that you're putting on airs that you're okay?" Tommy asked.

"Plus you went the wrong way. The hotel was the other way. And there's no way even drunk you would walk in the opposite way of where Daniel is even if you're drunk. You're directions aren't that shit," Dutch said.

"So why are you at a chapel huh? By yourself?" Bobby asked, reaching out from the pew in front of Johnny and tucking hair behind his ear.

"There's all these signs saying 'anyone' can get married in Nevada. I wanted to check."

"I'm sorry Johnny," Jimmy said reaching out and taking his hand and giving it a squeeze. "Is that something you want?"

"I..." Johnny frowned.

This was Jimmy's time, not time for them to worry about him.

Jimmy shook his hand.

"Hey! None of that. My bachelors party has been a blast. You managed to let the bozo's from work get their debauchery in without me having to deal with it or interact with it. You found me slots where I could play and wouldn't waste a ton of money but would get the most fun for my drunk ass. You ordered me the dumbest most ridiculous drink I've ever seen which is saying something since I've bought your ass that dumb pink Cadillac monstrosity in the mountains more times then I'd like to think about or count. I've had a great time. You've done a great job. So tell us okay?"

"Yeah we've been on this ride since you told us you liked Daniel. We've got stakes in the game okay?" Tommy said.

"Isn't it skin?" Bobby asked.

"Skin in the game?"

"Yeah."

"Wouldn't stakes be more like gambling?"

"Yeah but skin means you're own body is on the line too. You get that?"

"Yeah, weird. Anyway. We spent forever trying to help you get a date with Daniel. If you want to marry him...why the hell didn't you say so?"

"Why wouldn't I want to marry him?"

"I don't know? Not everyone wants marriage man. Some people just want to chill."

"And your mom went through a messy divorce," Bobby said gently.

"I love Daniel."

"Yeah I know. So you want to marry him?"

Johnny ducked his head, face burning. "Yeah."

"What a reaction!" Dutch said with a laugh. "Dude, how long have you wanted to marry him?"

"A long time."

"Yeah?"

"I mean I thought you did, but you've got it bad if you're checking out chapels in Las Vegas to see if you could elope. Would you have eloped?"

"No," Johnny said softly. "Mom and Lucille wouldn't like that."

"What about us?" Tommy complained.

"You're here," Johnny said.

"Ah so automatic invite," Bobby said with a nod. "Makes sense."

"We better have an automatic invite," Dutch said.

"We could still do a ceremony," Bobby said.

"Not the same," Johnny said.

"Well no, but-"

"You don't get the same legal protections," the preacher said.

"Yeah," Jimmy said softly.

"When it's possible," the preacher said. "You come back here and I'll marry you and your guy."

"No way man," Bobby said. "That's my job."

The preacher looked at Bobby surprised.

"Ah, father meet father," Dutch said with a laugh.

The preacher smiled patting Johnny's shoulder. "I'm glad, relieved that you've got good friends who want to be there. Looks like all you need is the green light to go. I hope it comes soon. You guys enjoy the chapel. My next couple should be arriving soon. Father," he said nodding to Bobby.

Bobby nodded then smacked Dutch's arm. "No one calls me that you bastard."

"I can't believe you're cursing in a chapel."

"I can't believe you made an old preacher think I'm like his contemporary."

"Aren't you?"

"I don't have my own place yet dude. I'm still working on it."

"Well hurry up will you? Because I'm not going to stop calling you that."

"Hey Johnny let's go back to the hotel huh?" Tommy asked giving his shoulders a gentle squeeze. "Bet you miss Daniel."

"Yeah," Johnny said.

He wanted to run his hands through Daniels hair. He waned to pull Daniel to him, close to him, to see that look Daniel gave him

sometimes. He wanted to kiss his jaw, his cheek, his palm, whatever skin Daniel would let close to his lips.

He got up, feeling a little wobbly. He'd forgotten he was drunk and leaned against the guys. He told them about all the weddings he'd watched. All the couples. All the papers he'd signed as a witness.

They got to the elevator and he pushed the button towards their rooms playing with the key he'd been given. He wanted to feel Daniel against him. He wanted to listen to him talk, to babble as he sucked on him.

The doors opened and Johnny stepped out into the hall staring at the numbers on the wall. He'd probably had too much to drink.

What if Daniel turned him down?

What if Daniel said no?

He'd say no.

Or would've.

In high school.

When they started dating if Daniel came onto him drunkenly.

But he wanted it.

He also wanted to talk to Daniel.

He felt like he had a lot to say.

But also nothing.

He just wanted to see him.

The guys walked him to his room.

"You'll be okay for brunch right?" Bobby asked.

"Yes. We'll see you there," Johnny said remembering his duties. "You will be there," he said pointing at Jimmy who laughed.

"Yeah of course man."

Brunch was special.

Brunch was with his parents and grandparents.

Whole family was coming in in secret that night, probably already in their rooms in a different hotel.

They'd rented a whole fancy room with a nice view of the strip.

Champagne with pieces of gold in it.

A place Jimmy's parents said had good quality food and drink.

And then they were going to go out.

There was a secret meeting spot, if it worked out both parties would meet at sunset in a surprise in a field of flowers.

He was coordinating it with the maid of honor.

His only real issue was to talk the guys out of their retiree looks they were sporting.

Like a bunch of dads. Matching Hawaiian shirts, shorts, visors and neon bags at their waists. When in Rome they'd said with a laugh, picking out the ugliest sunglasses Johnny was surprised were even made.

So everyone knows we're in the same group.

They'd said with a laugh, Jimmy delighted by it. And Johnny had caught them getting lost with the crowds of retirees at least ten times.

Like nope, wrong group bud, you're not over 60 yet.

Daniel knew. Maybe he could help. Help them be less fashion disasters.

There was a photographer meeting them there.

Pre-wedding party photos. It was going to be beautiful.

He hoped anyway.

He tried to unlock the door, the lock clicked. He pushed the door open.

Daniel was sitting on the big couch in a robe and tilted his head back looking at Johnny.

"Hey! How was drinks?"

"Was a lot," Johnny said shutting the door, wishing the guys a good night as they popped their heads in, waved, saying good night to Daniel, setting the bolt and dropping his keys on the table when the door shut, carefully trying to get out of his shoes. Struggling and frowning looking down at his feet.

It should've been easy. He'd been taking off his own shoes most of his life.

His brows furrowed.

He stumbled forward and landed into the solid warmth of Daniel.

Daniel laughed warmly, a fond sound emanating from his chest.

It was a delightful surprise to have him there, so close.

Johnny cupped the sides of Daniels' face.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"You're beautiful."

"Thank you."

"I missed you."

"Yeah? In the last couple of hours?"

"A lot."

"I missed you too."

Johnny wrapped his arms around Daniel's waist pulling him close. He wasn't wearing anything under the robe.

He pressed his lips to Daniel's shoulder.

"I'm so lucky."

"How so?" Daniel asked.

"You the prettiest, nicest, kindest guy I think I've ever met. Didn't have to like me. Didn't have to talk to me. But you did. You did, and you

love me," Johnny buried his face against Daniel's neck. His eyes were wet.

He sniffed.

"Hey now, what's wrong?" Daniel asked his hand on Johnny's head, fingers in his hair.

It was soothing.

Had he ever told Daniel that he liked that? That he liked a lot of what Daniel did?

He should.

"I love you."

"Why don't you come in and get comfortable hmm?" Daniel asked pulling back, just a little and kissing him.

Johnny nodded shifting his weight so they fell back onto the bed.

"Do we have an alarm for tomorrow?" Johnny asked looking up at Daniel from where he rested his chin on Daniel's sternum.

"Yup. And the front desk is going to call," Daniel said.

Johnny moved, down just a little, resting his head on Daniel's stomach. He smelled like a different soap. The stuff from the hotel.

He pushed the robe open a little and kissed the tan skin there.

"How'd you like your first trip to Vegas?" Johnny asked, touching the skin next to him. Daniel's side, his hip. Lazy touches, except he was so focused on it, on the feel of his skin.

"Yeah," Daniel said. "Slots were fun, and a few of the games. I talked with a bunch of people."

"Ah, I did see you with the retirees. Befriending elderly people again?"

"Again?" Daniel asked with a laugh.

It was weird to feel it from this position.

Johnny turned his head.

Leg.

Right there was Daniel's leg.

Daniel always touched his leg. Always. He ran his fingers down and back up.

"Like at the lodge. You've got nice legs."

"Thanks," Daniel said with a soft laugh again.

There were parts of his skin, the inner thigh that was so soft. He wanted to kiss it. He was going to.

He shifted, moving carefully so he wouldn't accidentally hurt Daniel, not elbow him somewhere or put too much weight where it'd hurt and he pressed his lips to Daniel's inner thigh.

Daniel stopped talking and Johnny flicked his gaze towards him. He was giving him that look. The one that made his stomach warm, molten.

He flicked his tongue out running it along Daniel's thigh.

"It might not be good," Johnny said looking up at Daniel since had his full attention. "I'm pretty sure I'm still drunk. But-" he carefully moved the rest of the robe aside. "I want to put that in my mouth, can I?"

"Seriously Johnny?"

"All I could think of, most of the walk home," Johnny said. "If it's bad, if I don't hear you or something, just kick me okay?"

"I'm not going to kick you," Daniel said. "Were you seriously thinking about giving me head the whole walk to me? Also am I home? Because we're in a hotel?"

Johnny blinked confused, up from where he was rubbing a circle against Daniel's thigh, inching closer.

"Home, yeah, you're home," he said pressing a kiss to Daniel's lower stomach. "And yes, wanted to listen to you talk about your day or whatever while I had you in my mouth."

"Damn."

"Oh hello," Johnny said.

"Are you talking to my dick?"

"Well it's up," Johnny said resting his head on Daniel's hip looking at it. "You wanna be in my mouth don't you? It's warmer there."

"Drunk you is dangerous," Daniel murmured.

"Dangerous? I'm just saying hello. Usually I don't get to be this close. I mean sometimes. But usually you're already inside of me. So I'm just enjoying the moment. The view? The view of you. I like the view of you. You're my favorite view. And it's your fault I can't stop thinking about it."

"My fault," Daniel asked amused from where he was propped up on his elbows looking at him, smiling.

"You ordered a blow job shot."

"And that wormed into your head huh?"

"I didn't realize it was a shot at first." Johnny said face a little pink.

"So you thought I was asking a stranger for a blow job?" Daniel asked with a laugh. "It's a lower alcoholic content creamy drink and I don't know, it felt fitting for a bachelor party."

"Yeah," Johnny said gaze sliding back to Daniel's dick.

It was very hard. He wanted to put it in his mouth, to feel the weight of it, to taste it.

Fingers were under his chin and drew his attention back up to Daniel.

"You know you're the only one who sucks my dick right? I don't go asking strangers to touch me. I can't say you're the only one who ever jerks me off, but that's because I do that too," Daniel said with a soft laugh, "But I'm not flexible enough to give myself a blow job."

"Have you tried?"

"Once, hurt myself and didn't even get close," Daniel said with a laugh.

"Can I?"

"I can't say no," Daniel said. "I mean it'd be like shooting myself in the foot at this point. If you want to, go for it. Shit. Don't choke yourself will you? Damn Johnny. You feel good. Next time I'll make you one at

home. We'll do blow job shots at home. I just drank it. But you're-ah-supposed to drink it with your hands behind your back. Like I could drink it from your lap. Or try. Ohh— or the bachelorette party was telling me about body shots. Let's do that. You can lay on the table again and I'll do body shots off you."

Johnny glanced up at him. That might be nice. He reached up and gently touched Daniel's stomach.

"Yeah shot goes there. What you want to do a shot off me?"

Johnny nodded.

"Fuck, yeah okay," Daniel said softly, shifting his hips a little, knee bending so he could press his foot into the bed.

All his leg muscles were tense. He must not be doing as terribly as he figured.

"You said you were lucky. I'm the damn lucky one. I was just chilling here, ready for an-ah- early night, and you were out there, thinking about me. Out there being in charge of festivities and you just wanted to be here."

Johnny felt a hand in his hair, that soothing way Daniel always touched his hair.

"Jimmy's college friends, the lawyer guys, all invited me when I left you guys, to go and watch the strippers with them," Daniel said with a laugh. "I thought about it, for a moment, because I've never been. But I didn't think it'd be fun. Not for me. More drinks and well, not you-ah. I mean I can just look at you, in you suit, trying to herd the retiree wannabes around. Watching everyone looking at you because you look so damn good in that suit. You stand out. And now you're here. Damn. Oh. Johnny move," Daniel said pushing his head away but Johnny held on.

He'd wanted a taste. He was going to get his taste.

He got it.

"Shit, Johnny spit that out. Let me get the trash can. Or...or a napkin. Tissues?" Daniel asked moving, twisting to get the box of tissues next to the bed and pulling a few sitting up and he paused.

"Damn," Daniel said softly, staring at him for a moment, like he got

stuck, then he shook his head and gently wiped off Johnny's face.

"Okay, spit it out. Here."

"Spit out what?"

"You didn't swallow it did you?"

"Yeah."

"Johnny."

"You're liked it. You think it's hot," Johnny said with a grin, poking Daniel's dick that was showing renewed interest.

"So, I also thought you in a tiny skirt is hot. Or watching you on the beach, or just driving, you can't base everything on what makes my dick hard."

"Are you saying you have bad taste?"

"Oh hell no. I've got the best taste. I picked you. I'm just saying....everything you do can get that result."

"So swallowing didn't do it?"

Daniel was flushed, he wrapped his arms around Johnny and pulled him back onto the bed with him with a hug, pressing a kiss to his neck. "I mean yeah, but so was seeing you with it on your face, on your suit. I don't know, it's all hot okay?"

Johnny nodded. "So you don't want me to do something about that?"

"Just let me breathe okay? It'll go away."

"Did I not do a good enough job?"

"You did a good job. It was great."

"Do I need to give you more blow jobs?" Johnny asked, pushing himself up a little and looking down at Daniel. "Is it just so rare that it's like a treat? I don't mind. Should I come to the dealership? Could do that in your office. Oh, you seem to like that idea," Johnny said looking down where his thigh was pressed between Daniel's legs.

"You know, I think I'm bad. But drunk you, drunk you has terribly wonderful terrible ideas."

"Is it terrible? Does it hurt? I'll go put it in my mouth again," Johnny said kissing Daniel's neck before sinking back down.

Or trying.

He struggled to move.

He looked at Daniel who was holding him close.

When did he get so strong?

"I love you, but I'm okay. You're drunk and as hot as it is to have you after my dick all night. It's that snake eating it's own tail."

"Ouroboros?"

"Yup."

Johnny tilted his head thoughtfully. "So, you don't want another blow job?"

"Right."

"Do you want to do it?"

Daniel stared at him and kissed Johnny's nose. "I want you to take a shower, brush your teeth and then come cuddle with me. I want cuddles."

"Who are you?"

"Great question,"

"Are you going to take a shower with me?"

"No."

"Are you going to watch me shower?"

"No."

"You'll be here?"

"Yup. Waiting to cuddle. And only cuddle."

"Are you going to jerk off by yourself?"

"I mean... I haven't decided. Might watch some TV," Daniel said.

"We've...well you, have got a lot to do tomorrow and it'd be good if you got some sleep."

"Okay," Johnny said pulling away, carefully rolling off of Daniel and pushing himself up, wobbling a little and heading towards the bathroom.

He stripped, he showered, he brushed his teeth and he put on the robe, too tired, too lazy and not really functioning enough to put on clothes and headed back out to the main room, towards the bed.

Daniel was under the covers watching TV.

"You all squeaky clean?"

"They had mouth wash."

"Fancy."

"Can cuddles include a few kisses?" Johnny asked lifting the covers and wrapping his arms around Daniel.

He was so warm and solid.

"I can't say no to kisses," Daniel said turning his head, cupping the side of Johnny's face and kissing him. "I'm still very very deep in kissing debt."

Johnny grinned, pressing his face against Daniel, breathing him in.

"Is the show good?"

"It's a rerun, so it's fine," Daniel said. "Ready to sleep?"

Johnny nodded kissing Daniel's shoulder as it passed over him to switch off the light, waiting for Daniel to adjust the way he slept, arms wrapping around Johnny, like he wanted to keep him safe, and the safest spot was in his arms. All night long.

"I love you."

"I love you too tesoro." Daniel said softly, pressing a warm kiss to temple.

Johnny had mispoken earlier when he said he'd walked home. But it was an accidental mispoken truth. He'd meant the hotel. But it'd also been the truth. This, was his home. This spot in Daniel's arms, nestled

in close enough to hear his heart beat and to feel his warmth to soft tickle of his breath. A place he treasured, a place where he was treasured.

Johnny woke up with a headache. He buried his head in a pillow to stop the sun from getting at him. Something cool gently tapped his hand.

He peered around and up at Daniel who was moving to sit on the edge of the bed next to him.

"Morning Sleeping Beauty, how are you feeling?" Daniel asked.

"Awful," Johnny said.

"Well I come with gifts of water and asprin," Daniel said opening his palm and holding the medicine out towards him.

Johnny sat up and took it from him and a swig of water while Daniel smoothed his hair with a fond smile on his face, kissing his forehead. "You going to be okay? Need some more back up today?"

"Let me see how I feel after I get dressed," Johnny said resting his head on Daniel's shoulder.

His head felt so heavy.

"Well you were kind to yourself. You already hung up your outfit for today in the closet." Daniel said. "I thought it was kind of silly how you set everything up in advance. I mean I'm still just digging out of my suitcase but now I get it."

Johnny looked up at Daniel then glanced at the clock. "Did you want to do it this morning?"

Daniel smiled warmly kissing his cheek. "Tesoro you look positively miserable. No. But, when you're feeling better and less hungover, yes. I don't want to be the reason the best man couldn't get the groom to the secret wildflower meeting spot. Jimmy and Jenny would kill me," Daniel said.

"Sorry, that's only once then this trip," Johnny said.

"Well I mean there's still a chance tonight," Daniel said kissing his ear. "But if it doesn't happen I will live."

"Will you?"

"Hey, I'm maturing thank you very much. We've been here 3 nights and night one had all the guys in here in our bed and I didn't try to murder them."

"So mature. You've grown so much."

"You're teasing, but I know that you've put a ton of work into this. And maybe I spent all the allotted money you gave me at the poker table learning how to play and then buying a deck of cards specifically so I could play strip poker with you. But I mean if we gotta play that at home, so be it. I don't mind winning all of your clothes at home or at a hotel."

"Strip poker huh?"

"Yup. All our clothes on the line."

"What happens when you loose the last of your clothes?"

"Sex."

"Your rule or the rule of the game?"

"My rule. For when you and I play."

Johnny laughed softly kissing Daniel. "I'm looking forward to it."

He stood up carefully and made his way to the closet getting dressed for the day. He cleaned up a bit and then turned back to Daniel who was sitting on the bed watching TV on his stomach, dressed.

"Ready for surprise brunch?"

"Day of surprises, totally ready. Got the camera and everything."

Johnny smiled holding out his hand and Daniel turned off the TV and took it.

"You know you're also my tesoro, right?" Johnny said.

Daniel grinned leaning up to kiss him. "I know. But you gotta pick a different nickname."

"LaRusso?" Johnny said with a teasing smile.

"Hell no," Daniel said pushing the door open and walking, holding his hand.

"Honey."

"I'm as sweet as, but no," Daniel said pushing the button for the elevator.

Johnny laughed softly. "Sweetie? Babe? Sweetheart? Princess? Love? Darling? Old Man?"

Daniel walked into the elevator and shook his head with a laugh. "None of them are as good as you clenching around me and just saying my name as you beg me for more. Or when you hold onto me real tight and cry out my name when you come."

Johnny felt his face burn and Daniel grinned kissing his cheek.

"Pervy old man is what I should've gone with," Johnny said quietly.

"Your favorite pervy old man," Daniel said with a smile. "But that cannot be the nickname."

Johnny nodded, breathing and feeling the warmth on his face and ears fade as the doors opened. The guys didn't look great. But Jimmy's friends from work looked worse and that was better at least.

"So are we having brunch here?" Jimmy asked with a yawn.

"Nope," Johnny said. "Follow me."

It was hot outside on the strip and bright. The guys winced and complained but followed him, and Daniel, walking hand in hand to the brunch spot. Up the elevator to the beautiful view where Jimmy's family was waiting.

Jimmy froze at the entrance, staring at his parents, his grandparents, his aunts and uncles who Johnny had made sure had confetti to throw at him and they did, with a little pop.

Frozen in the spot, shocked, stunned.

Dutch gave him a gentle push forward and it didn't propel him forward, instead it broke a dam and Jimmy started crying.

"If this is his response to a surprise of his family then...will he be okay?" Daniel asked Johnny softly as he took some pictures.

“Yeah, he will.”

Brunch was as ridiculous, as Johnny had expected. Great food, great drink, a beautiful view, all just for them for the hour.

He watched Jimmy chatting with his family, happy to see them. A different man then the boy who snuck into his bedroom to drink and cry because he was being crushed under his family’s expectations. His relationships with them had healed. Blossomed into something new. And it made Johnny happy.

Jimmy was going to be okay.

He didn't need Johnny to wipe away his tears anymore.

His family could do that, Jenny could do that.

And that was the next surprise as he loaded them up into a couple vans they rented.

Dutch driving him and the guys to Red Rock Canyon.

He had a compass and everything.

Scavenger hunt.

"Alright Jimmy, got a game for you. There's a surprise, you gotta follow this map, these instructions and here's a compass," Johnny said passing the items over.

"You're not going to be my guide?"

"Nope, you've got this, we're just going to follow you."

"But you know where I need to go?"

"Yeah, but I'm the only one and I'm not telling."

Jimmy frowned looking at the map and Johnny threw an arm over his shoulder leaning over to point at the map. "I will tell you where we are at least."

"Oh thank god," Jimmy said relaxing against him.

"We're right here," Johnny said poking the map. "Now that's it. Lead on, you can do it."

Johnny ruffled Jimmy's hair, not enough to mess it up, but enough to be friendly and encouraging.

It felt...weird. Like he was giving Jimmy a map out of his life. Directions to a new world, a new adventure. Like Jimmy didn't need him any more. But he'd still be there, behind him if he ever needed him.

He wondered if that was like a best man's duties. Make sure your buddy gets to that next chapter safely so they don't need you anymore.

Or was that more of a parents feelings?

A big brothers? Yet he was the youngest.

"Hey," Daniel said softly, taking his hand. "You're not saying goodbye. It's a new chapter. And you're going to be in it."

Johnny watched the guys, Bobby, Dutch and Tommy surrounded Jimmy, teasing him about his sense of direction, laughing and pouring over the map with him.

"You also don't have to hang back. You can be up there with them you know?" Daniel said squeezing his hand.

"I don't want to give anything away," Johnny said softly. "I don't want to ruin the surprise. They're too smart, all together. They know me too well. One of them will catch on and then it's game over. Besides," Johnny lifted Daniel's hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. "I like being by your side."

"You flirt! Me? What do you want from me? A date? Is this you buttering me up for a date? I'll have you know I'm very happily taken."

"By who? I'll fight 'em."

Daniel laughed, it echoed warmly along the trail. "Well he's tall and handsome and blonde. Pretty blue eyes that he stubbornly won't protect. Where the hell are your sunglasses? Mr. I'm squinting because it's too bright out?"

"Listen I don't want to ruin it because of the sun."

"I should've made you put sunblock on."

"I did."

"Did you put on the 50 spf?"

"I don't remember. I just grabbed what I found and put it on."

"You're going to be a lobster."

"We didn't pack the 50?"

"I packed 30. For me. I mean you might be fine. But your skin's more sensitive then mine."

"Tan is in fashion."

"Yeah, tan. Not tomato red. I tan, you burn."

"Maybe 30 will be fine."

"Yeah, as soon as we're done with what we're doing I'm making you a hat out of that map.

"With a brim or a little hat they sell at fast food restaurants that provides no shade? Because if you can origami a hat with a brim I will be super impressed."

"Fine you're right, I only know the kind that also doubles as a boat. But there's no shade out here. Why here? Why couldn't you have picked a forest?"

"I didn't pick it. Jimmy wanted to come to Vegas. I just found something pretty nearby."

"Uh huh, can you please think of places with shade? You're squinting and miserable."

"What? Should I just close my eyes and let you lead me around?"

"Maybe," Daniel said. "Maybe that's a good idea. And then I'll swipe a hat off some tourist."

"We're tourists."

"No, we're definitely not tourists."

"Don't you become a tourist anytime you leave where you live?"

"So wait, am I tourist if I go back to Newark?"

"I mean you don't live there any more so maybe?"

"How can I be a tourist if I know all the cool spots to get lox?"

"I've officially spent too much time with you to know exactly what you mean and where you mean."

"Nah, you've spent too much time with me when you can understand Louie's dad when he's drunk."

"Yeah, that one shocked me too."

"Stop distracting me. You're going to fry. And then I'm going to spend tonight slathering you up in aloe vera. And then neither of us are going to be able to sleep because you won't be able to get comfortable and I can't sleep if I can't feel you nearby and I can't touch you if your sunburned everywhere."

"I'm not walking around the desert naked. Like I'm wearing a shirt and pants. I can't get burned through my clothes can I?"

"I hope not."

"I'm pretty sure I can't or else everyone would always be sunburnned."

"Except me."

"Why? Because the sun loves you and doesn't hate you?"

"Yeah, my Italian ancestors made sure we all got kisses from the sun. I don't know what your ancestors did but it must've been bad to get so much hate from the sun."

"Thanks. I got it," Johnny said with a sigh. "Maybe I should just pick you up and hold you over my head as shade. You can make out with the sun from up in the air."

"Don't you dare."

"We're almost there. We'll get the photos and then you and I can bolt. Okay?" Johnny whispered.

"I'm gonna run, and you better keep up."

"Of course I can keep up."

"Last one back to the van, loses."

"You're on."

They walked into the spot, coming in from the opposite direction was another group. Jenny, her head bowed over her map. Her maid of honor nodding at Johnny. Johnny sighed.

They were all idiots. All of the guys were crowded around the map, not paying a lick of attention. Johnny reached for the map, pulling it from Jimmy's hands.

"Go man."

"Go?" Jimmy said but then he saw her and he ran.

She'd caught his eye and laughed and ran meeting in the middle amongst blooming desert sage.

The guys whirled on them arms wrapping around Johnny and Daniel.

"You scheming bastard."

"That's the most romantic thing I've seen."

"I can't believe you two kept this a secret."

"I had nothing to do with it," Daniel said with a laugh. "I just kept all of Johnny's secrets."

"Maid of honor helped me plan this one," Johnny said with a smile.

“Sorry, we made a bet,” Daniel said squirming out of their reach.

“A bet?” Dutch asked grabbing him and pulling him back.

“First one back to the van won.”

“So you two were going to set up arguably the cutest little thing and then bolt?”

“Your plan better have been not to bone in my van,” Dutch said with a frown messing up Daniel’s hair.

“The plan was to get Johnny and his sensitive skin out of the dessert and into some shade.”

“I’m convinced I put the SPF 50 on and Daniel is adamant he only packed one, his, which is like 35 or something.”

“Dude, I’ve got my, what did you call it? Dad retiree vacation hat right here, hold on,” Bobby said digging around in the bag he’d brought with him and pulling out a wide brimmed floppy hat with a cord. He plopped it on Johnny’s head and pulled the string so it’d stay snug. “There. Problem solved.”

“Why aren’t you wearing it?” Johnny asked.

“I’m not about to bolt. You need it more, plus I forgot till right now that I packed all this shit. Oh hey my sunglasses!”

Johnny frowned as Bobby put on ridiculous highlighter pink glasses.

“The goal was not to ruin photos.”

“Jimmy will have fun with silly photos. We don’t have to be serious all the time. I mean the photos they got earlier were great, now come on you two, time to join in.”

When the photos were done they trudged back to the car together. Only when the parking lot came into view did the guys take off.

“Wait! Why are you running?” Jimmy called.

“To beat Johnny and Daniel to the van!” Dutch called back.

“They made a bet,” Tommy added.

Johnny met Daniel’s gaze, saw the look in his eyes and ran. Taking off, weaving between other visitors coming and going from the parking lot, his borrowed hat flopping in the wind. He could hear the guys laughing. But, they hadn’t taken enough of a head start. And they should’ve known better.

Johnny smacked his hand on the hot side of Dutch’s van and turned grinning as Bobby barreled in next to him. Then Tommy and Dutch and Daniel who knocked into him with enough force to knock the air from his lungs, not reach for the van but for him.

“How?” Bobby complained.

“Yeah we were ahead of you,” Dutch said.

“Still the fastest,” Johnny said with a grin looking at Daniel who

kissed him.

“Hurry up and get in the van so the sun will stop trying to fry you,” Daniel said.

“What do I win?” Johnny asked.

“Bragging rights?” Tommy asked.

“We already know I’m the fastest though,” Johnny said with a frown climbing into the van.

“I think we’re technically all in the clear,” Dutch said. “It was a bet between Johnny and Daniel. We just decided to play along too.”

Johnny turned to Daniel.

“I’ll make you something,” Daniel said.

Johnny sat back thoughtfully. Everything Daniel made was amazing. Random things he wanted to try making that he saw in cookbooks, on TV or in magazines. Family recipes and just things he’d picked up in Jersey.

Johnny tried to think of every meal he’d had. What his favorite thing was. Then something settled. He turned to Daniel.

“You haven’t ever made it, so you can veto it. I only had it once, but I loved it-“

“Dude just say what it is,” Tommy said.

“Seven Veils Cake,” Johnny said.

“Oh! I remember you mentioning that,” Bobby said. “Honestly want to try that too. Who made it?”

“My mom did,” Daniel said looking thoughtful and chewing on his thumb nail, brows furrowed.

“I can help,” Johnny said quickly. “It’s seven layers so I expect it’s time intensive and a pain. But the first dinner I had at your place, we had that.”

“I can’t believe you remember that,” Dutch said with a laugh.

“I’ll get the recipe from Ma and we can try,” Daniel said with a smile

taking Johnny's hand in his.

"Yeah?"

"So when are we coming over to eat this cake?" Tommy asked.

"You gotta do it before I go back to Korea," Dutch said.

"Who invited you all?" Daniel asked with a frown.

"We've all got a copy of your keys, so we invited ourselves," Bobby said with a laugh.

Daniel sighed leaning his head against Johnny's shoulder.

"Then you all better bring dinner."

"Deal," Tommy said.

"We'll let Jimmy know."

"Jimmy might be on a honeymoon by the time we do this."

"Well then freeze him a slice or something," Dutch said.

"Our freezer is full enough as is. There's not room for a slice of a seven layer cake in there. You snooze you loose," Daniel said.

"We can just make it again," Johnny said.

"You like that cake a lot huh?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah. And it has good memories," Johnny said, running his thumb over the back of Daniel's hand, over his knuckles.

Chapter End Notes

-In their hotel room Johnny beelined towards the bathroom to check the sunblock. "Look I knew it said 50 spf. See, it's the right one," Johnny said holding up the container he'd used earlier. -

The weird laws are all real.

Cioppino
Dungeness crab risotto
Dungeness crab mac and cheese

Blow job shot

End of an Era

"Tell me as soon as he gets here okay?" Daniel said to Louie who nodded but grumbled to himself all the complaints he always had.

The auto shop was doing well. They'd created a good spot in the community, people liked the bonsai Daniel gave out with care instructions and Mr. Miyagi's business card. They'd like the performance he'd done at the All Valley fest with Miyagi-do. Johnny had wheeled out a bunch of ice for part of the performance and Daniel had chopped through them. It'd drummed up business for both LaRusso auto and Miyagi-do.

Mr. Miyagi's booth where he talked about bonsai and sold a few did well and Louie had been surprisingly helpful running between all three booths and taking care of them or helping watch the booth while someone ran off to do something else. He'd given out his business card to so many people that he'd run out.

And business was booming. He could hire more people, lower his prices like he wanted, make sure that they were giving people the best deal in town not just on cars but on everything, repairs, rentals, literally everything.

He smiled looking at his desk calendar. He'd have to put it away soon. Johnny would get embarrassed if he saw that Daniel had in fact made his own pinup calendar, but instead of hot firemen or women sitting on cars it was Johnny. Every month, another beautiful picture of his boyfriend.

Though, the more Daniel turned that phrase over in his mind the more it didn't feel right.

Boyfriend felt too weak.

He wanted a better term a bigger term. Lover was too...little and too much. Their relationship wasn't just physical even though physical was nice.

It was more.

What he wanted was what Jimmy was getting. But who knew if Johnny wanted that, if Johnny would be okay for that. And if so, if he was interested...how? How did he pull it off?

Daniel thought it over in his mind again and again. Maybe he'd talk to Jimmy and ask what he thought, as a legal guy, a guy in the midst of the process of getting married.

West Hollywood had ideas, things in place, but they'd moved out of West Hollywood to be closer to their family, closer to Mr. Miyagi and now Daniel didn't know.

Did those protections expand to the rest of LA? To the rest of California?

Maybe not.

It didn't matter. It was Johnny's birthday. Daniel was excited. Excited to give Johnny something good. He'd already given him a guitar, a magic kit, a surfboard, a lot of little things that he'd read about in the magazine's Johnny had been in that he liked. And his rewards had been good. Listening to Johnny play guitar, picking up these skills he'd let go of. But this was even bigger.

Maybe it was as ridiculous, but if there was any benefit of his job, other than gifting his Ma get a new car as an grand opening gift, it was this.

"Daniel, he's here," Louie said poking his head into Daniel's office.

Daniel nodded closing the calendar and quickly putting it in a desk drawer.

Johnny probably knew it existed, Daniel was pretty sure he'd mentioned wanting to make a calendar of Johnny for work, playing it off as how business people in offices always had photos on their desks but Daniel wanted to go above and beyond that. He wanted a calendar.

But Johnny still probably would get overwhelmed if he saw the actual calendar, saw the photos Daniel had picked, the photos he'd helped take on the beach, the photo from Japan of Johnny's kimono all in disarray, in that cheerleader uniform, and maybe too many tasteful almost nudes that Daniel was way too happy to develop in the rental dark room like an obsessed creep.

Thankfully when you rented a dark room no one else went in there out of fear of destroying the photos.

He'd added some normal ones too, they weren't all....almost erotic.

Like one of Johnny working on the Avanti in a dress shirt after a fancy party they went to, sleeves rolled up and focused, jacket thrown over his shoulder. A few modeling photos from Okinawa that he liked the best.

It was art.

Or at least that was his excuse.

And he kept it locked up in his desk if anyone came by for a meeting or when he left to go home. So no one but him ever saw it. It was like his treat to get through the day.

He stood up as Johnny popped in. He was dressed nicely from brunch with Laura, a short break in best man duties, a day off.

"Hey you wanted me to meet you here?"

"Yeah I wanted to show you something," Daniel said reaching out and taking Johnny's hand, walking him through the dealership saying hello to customers.

It was nice, the atmosphere in the dealership and in the showrooms. He got more customers then he thought he would, mostly because the bar was so damn low. It made him mad sometimes the stories the staff told him, of customer's horror stories they came and shared.

There were so many of them who got the rug pulled out from under them, tricked into awful add-ons and unseen fees hidden in the pages and pages of documentation. Which was something he'd worked on, making that dumb stack of papers legible and understandable. He'd actually hired Jimmy to sit down and help him translate legal jargon into something basic and understandable.

The point of it all was that it worked. He had customers who, shocked at how nice the shopping experience was told their friends, and they told their friends and the welcoming atmosphere stayed and grew and it just seemed like such common sense that Daniel didn't understand other dealerships and other shops.

His next goal was a house. But he was saving for that. Slowly. It'd take time. Especially when the gift he was giving wasn't particularly cheap.

They were walking through the lot, chatting about how Johnny's brunch with his mom went, about all the stuff he was doing with

Jenny and Jimmy when Daniel spotted it.

"What do you think?" Daniel asked, motioning towards the red car.

"Wow, you got these in now?" Johnny asked, running his fingers gently across the hood.

Daniel had been watching Johnny like a hawk, as he flipped through the car magazine's Daniel brought home. As he showed him the upcoming models and it was without a doubt this was the one Johnny seemed to like the best.

"Want to take it for a spin?" Daniel asked holding out the keys.

Johnny was looking inside the car, through the windows and then slowly turned to Daniel.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, I'll go with you, it's good to do test rides with people every once in a while. Plus then I can think of new things to tell Louie he needs to work on."

"Aren't you a little hard on him?"

"Well I want him to succeed."

"Yeah," Johnny said reaching for the keys.

"I want a kiss first," Daniel said moving them out of reach.

Johnny kissed him before taking the keys and heading to the driver's side.

"So what do you know about it?" Daniel asked getting into the passenger side as Johnny started the car and made his way out of the lot.

"It has rear wheel drive with a v8 engine, 205 horsepower," Johnny said listing off things and Daniel smiled.

He looked happy, test driving a new car.

The Avanti was...going to have to be retired. He hated it. He loved that car, but the fact of the matter was Johnny needed something new, something reliable, something he could love just as much and they could get a house with a nice garage and the Avanti and the Ford

could live there. Side by side in their retirement, well loved and cared for while Johnny and Daniel drove things that were safer, more modern and easy for Daniel to get the parts to repair.

"Hey, let's go to that car hop," Daniel said motioning to the road that would take them there.

It'd been a while, they went a fairly often, but it'd been so long since that first time they'd gone in the Avanti. Daniel had been so sure that Johnny was kidnapping him and his mom and was so mad about Johnny babying him and his knee. He'd been so sure that Johnny was just being kind because he felt guilty, being his friend to clear his conscious that Daniel had gotten the messiest thing on the menu. On purpose.

They went a couple times a year, sometimes more. Sometimes in the Ford, sometimes the Avanti. Sometimes in Daniel's new car.

Johnny turned off and parked and the ladies skated up then one leaned down.

"Johnny! Daniel! I didn't recognize you this isn't the Avanti. Whose car is it?"

"I'm test driving-"

"It's Johnny's," Daniel said with a smile.

Johnny turned so suddenly to look at him wide eyed and speechless.

"It's mine?" Johnny said so softly.

"I'll get your usual and be back later," the lady said smiling at Daniel and squeezing Johnny's arm gently before skating off.

"I mean the 1991 Pontiac Firebird comes in 8 different colors and this is the sedan trim, there's also a convertible, you can have your pick. But I know you like red and this is...well you seemed to like this one the best. So it's yours if you want it, my birthday gift to you."

"This is too much Daniel," Johnny said looking at the steering wheel underneath his fingers.

"Too much is 19 bouquets."

Johnny laughed softly sniffing.

"Speaking of which I can't believe you didn't even notice," Daniel said leaning back and grabbing a bouquet of red roses and handing them to Johnny. "I know they're cheesy but I liked the red, more red anyway."

"I thought it was just like a new thing you were trying out," Johnny said taking the bouquet and rubbing at his eyes.

"What that we put bouquet in the backseat of every car?"

"I didn't see them I smelled them. I thought you were trying a new new car smell," Johnny said with a laugh.

"Ah, well you did say there's only like three florists you like with roses that smell like roses and that all the grocery store's roses don't smell."

"It's because they're shipped from overseas where they're refrigerated and by the time they get here the smell is gone, that with the way they've been grown so they last longer to make the journey and a dash of chemicals means no scent," Johnny said.

Daniel leaned over, gently turning Johnny towards him, kissing him. "And these roses?"

"More locally sourced and a different strain," Johnny said.

"So you like it and the car?"

Johnny turned back to look at the dashboard, running his hand along it for a moment, over the console.

"It's because of the Avanti huh?"

"It's running on parts they don't make anymore. I worry, you know? What happens if you get into an accident or if something happens while you're out? The safety features just aren't up to the current industry standards. It's why I've swapped out the Ford too," Daniel said quietly. "No strings either, for this. The title will be in your name so it's yours. Just like the Avanti. I'm just footing the bill. Which isn't that bad, honestly," Daniel moved over pressing his forehead against Johnny's, hand on the back of his neck, watching those baby blues fill up with tears.

"But a car-"

"You always tell me we should celebrate every little thing. Look a cute

dog, or saw something cool on the way to work. Not just the big moments and I pushed back on that. Not because I don't want to but because you already give me so much. But this, a birthday, is a perfect excuse to finally return the favor."

"You already made a big deal out of all my birthdays."

"Yeah and you flew me home and took me to Atlantic city for my 21st."

"Your mom said that was how you wanted to spend your 21st when you were little. You had been wanting to go to the casino there and getting super boozy stuff at one of the clubs your parents used to go to."

"See!" Daniel said. "A car is nothing."

"It's not nothing," Johnny said softly. "Thank you Daniel."

"Do you want this one or a different one? Want other features?"

"No, this one is perfect."

Daniel smiled, taking Johnny's hand in his, chatting until their food came and right before they left an older woman skated out.

"Hey hon, happy to have you both here today. You know, I marked it on the calendar when your mom used to bring you."

"You did?"

Daniel smiled watching the faint blush spread on Johnny's cheeks.

"He was the cutest little thing. Though I bet you were too Daniel. Your mom promised to bring photos next time."

"Next time?"

"Well your moms come sometimes," she said with a grin. "And Lucille promised to bring some family scrapbook."

Daniel felt his heart sink. He couldn't believe his mother. Couldn't believe she was using the scrapbook against him in such a way.

"Well for old times sake," she said leaning down and passing Johnny a vanilla ice cream cone. "Happy birthday Johnny."

“Thank you,” Johnny said staring at the ice cream in awe as the woman skated away.

“She remembered huh?” Daniel asked.

“She did,” Johnny said.

“Well you want me to hold that while you drive?” Daniel asked. “We still have paperwork to sign.”

“Oh, right, do you have meetings? Have I kept you out too long?” Johnny asked glancing at the watch on his wrist.

“No, no rush. But I do want to sign this over to you, I want you to have it fully and completely today. And I was planning to make dinner, if you want. Or we could go out, if there’s somewhere you wanted to eat. Louie’s staying with Ma tonight.”

“Then, let’s go home,” Johnny said passing Daniel the ice cream cone, turning on the car again and leaning over, for one long slow lick of the ice cream, meeting Daniel’s eye with a grin before turning making his way back to West Hollywood and back to the dealership. Leaning over for a lick just often enough to make Daniel want to put off signing the papers and tell Johnny to drive them home. It could all wait. But he…he could not.

“That was cruel,” Daniel complained when Johnny parked at the dealership. Ice cream had melted on his fingers and Johnny had just finished licking each one clean.

“How so?” Johnny asked, “Oh, right,” and he leaned over kissing him, warm and sweet and tasting like ice cream.

“Not what I meant,” Daniel said gripping Johnny’s nice shirt in his hands when he started to pull away.

“I think it’d be a bad idea to have sex in your dealership parking lot in a car that technically we don’t own yet, when there’s customers still milling about…and your staff.”

Daniel sighed, letting go of Johnny, as a “Hey cuz! Hey Johnny! How was the drive?” floated in through the open window.

“Hey Louie.”

“Ah man, didn’t bring me anything? You guys totally had lunch

without me. Unfair. Even when I went to all the hard work of getting and bringing all the documents and our fancy LaRusso Auto pens out to you so you can go home."

"How about I take you next time," Johnny said carefully gathering up the stack of paper and the pens, passing them to Daniel to organize.

"Heck yeah, can I drive?"

"No."

Daniel smiled as he signed the papers, as Johnny filled out his information and signed.

Giving Ma a new car had been almost as sweet. One of the first things he did was helping her trade in the old '69 Chevelle Concours Wagon for something she wouldn't have to push. The thought that she drove that thing, by herself back to Newark while he was in Okinawa made him sick to his stomach.

It wasn't safe. But now he knew she was, like he knew Johnny now had better air bags and better safety features just in case some asshole tried to pick a fight. And they'd upgrade again in the future. It'd be easy.

This was maybe the best part about owning the dealership. He wasn't sure what else there was too it. It felt weird, having reached his goals earlier than planned and being there.

Now what? Kept bouncing around in his head and he kept pushing it aside. Because Johnny had bet on him and inklings of doubt left him full of guilt.

Johnny drove home after Louie took the papers back, after insurance was called and dealt with, the one thing they had to get out of the car to do. Which gave Daniel time to grab his stuff from the office. And once at home they tackled the Avanti, the same way they had for the Ford.

Everything that was in it came out and was sorted. To be kept, to be thrown away, moved to the Firebird.

Johnny took good care of his car and it wasn't that dirty. But they still broke out the car soap and the wax and in a section of the apartment garage the owner said was okay for washing cars they went to work.

Maybe they should've changed first. But Daniel liked watching Johnny roll up his sleeves and dive right in, and maybe he liked purposefully missing the car with the hose and hitting Johnny and hearing the surprised sound he made.

Maybe he liked hiding on the other side of the Avanti when Johnny retaliated hearing their laughter and shouts echo. He liked seeing Johnny's shirt cling to him. He liked watching Johnny brush water from his face, that look he got in his eyes, a spark of challenge, of play. Daniel would reap what he'd sown and he couldn't wait.

"Will you tell me what you want?" Daniel asked.

He sat back and looked down at Johnny and Johnny looked up at him, trying to figure out what he was asking.

"What I want?"

Easy. To spend time with Daniel. He wanted them to go on trips together. He wanted to move somewhere with a garden. He wanted-

"How do you like it?" Daniel asked hand on his knee, gently rubbing a circle on the side of his knee, pressing carefully.

"How-" Johnny frowned.

"You always let me do what I want, you rarely....tell me what you want ...tonight I won't do anything until you tell me."

Oh. Oh.

Johnny flushed bright red.

"What do you enjoy Johnny? Do you like being on your back? Do you want your hips off the bed? Do you want your legs up high on my shoulders? Or around my hips? Do you want me to hold them apart? Or do you want to be on your knees? Does it hurt to be on your knees or do you prefer it? I don't mind the view at first but I miss your face, though I like kissing your back. Do you want to be on your side? The way, sometimes we have sex in the morning? Or do you want me to hold one of your legs up, to give a different angle? Or do you want me on my back while you chase your own pleasure? The view of that is

quite nice. Or do you miss it like when we'd rub against one another trying to be quiet at Mr. Miyagi's?"

Daniel gently reached out, cupping the side of Johnny's face.

"Do you want me to hold you down? Do you want me to tie you up? Do you want me to be gentler? Rougher?"

"I-I like what we do," Johnny said.

Daniel sighed laying down next to him. "Today, I want to know what you like best. Maybe I jumped too far ahead," Daniel said leaning in close. "How about kissing? Do you have any feedback there? Do you like this?" Daniel asked kissing him. He pulled back and Johnny frowned. "Or do you prefer more tongue?" Daniel asked leaning back in for an open mouth kiss.

His tongue brushing against Johnny's. Like the previous kiss it was too short. Frustratingly short.

"I like longer kisses then that," Johnny said when Daniel pulled away, studying him.

Daniel laughed. "Okay, I can do that."

Daniel wanted feedback. He wanted to know what Johnny liked. Wanted Johnny to talk about that. And it made sense. Johnny sort of just went with the flow. Did what Daniel wanted to do. But.

Why the hell was it so embarrassing? Why did what he want get stuck in his throat? Daniel talked about what he wanted all the time. He was clear. And he'd been asking Johnny to speak up more. And...he had. He'd said no to things that he might not have once upon a time. Things that might've been uncomfortable due to a surface level. On the hood of a hot car or on a cold table. They'd had...phone sex where he thought he'd been a little clearer. But Daniel hadn’t been looking at him then.

Daniel wanted details. He wanted to know more. And Johnny understood that. But what did he like? No. What did he like best? What did he want to try?

He was supposed to say something, but it was hard to focus because he just wanted to enjoy how close Daniel was and the taste of him. But of course Daniel hadn't lost his train of thought. Not this time, not when he had a point and a specific plan, and he pulled away again.

"Better?"

"Yeah," Johnny said, voice coming out heavy. "Let's try it."

"Try what?"

"The handcuffs you bought."

Daniel looked at him in surprise.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'll try it."

"And if it's too much?"

"I'll tell you to stop."

"Okay. I'll ask too. And if you don't respond I'll let you go."

"Okay."

Daniel got up off the bed going through his drawer trying to find them. He'd bought those so long ago. Johnny had remembered seeing them go in a drawer, and then a box, then another box. Daniel had got them but never asked to use them.

"You know," Daniel said turning back, "I know you avoided the question."

Best. What do you like best?

"I like being able to see you," Johnny said.

"Yeah?" Daniel asked

Daniel leaned down to kiss him again hands finding his, fingers tracing his skin and then in those quick movements Daniel used sometimes, like hopping up from the sand, or knocking his legs out from under him so he'd fall onto the bed Daniel moved his hands above his head and put more weight into keeping them there, pinning him with a click.

It was new.

Johnny tested it. Just one wrist. In case of panic. But otherwise it was fine. He couldn't go anywhere easily. He studied Daniel who was

looking at him, eyes dark, pupils blown.

"That okay? We'll start with one hand."

"Yeah."

"Too tight?"

"No."

"What do you want me to do next?"

"Sex."

"Well I figured that. But smaller steps."

Johnny frowned looking at Daniel, thinking, trying to figure out how to get past the lump in his throat, past whatever always blocked him.

"I like when you kiss my neck."

"You're so red," Daniel said softly moving towards Johnny's neck.

"Softer kisses or harder kisses?" Daniel asked. "Teeth?"

"Daniel, I like the way you do it. I like the way you do everything. If I don't like it I'll tell you okay? Like I have in the past. And...and I'll let you know if I need more of something. But if we have to stop every five seconds..."

"Okay," Daniel said pressing his lips to Johnny's neck. Soft kisses and then gently bites, tugs on his skin.

Daniel shifted his weight moving his hands so they ran along Johnny's sides and down his hip before hooking under his leg and hooking it over Daniel's own waist. Daniel looked around, reached for lube and tried to twist off the cap.

"Need some help?" Johnny asked.

"Bend this knee and move it a bit to the side will you?" Daniel said nudging the leg not wrapped around his hip.

Johnny shifted, making more space for Daniel.

"I've got a hand if you need one," Johnny said reaching out.

“It’s just a little stuck. I put the lid on wrong last time,” Daniel said, biting his lower lip as he tried again.

“Maybe next time we open the containers before you handcuff one of my arms to the bedpost?” Johnny recommended feeling some of the tension in his chest in his limbs dissipate.

Watching Daniel struggle, tongue sticking out a little focused, trying to open a bottle was adorable and endearing.

“Hey, I just want to give you what you want for your birthday. I’m trying to be romantic and this is not cooperating.”

“Maybe it’s a sign,” Johnny said.

“I refuse. Not when you’re already naked and can’t go anywhere,” Daniel said. “I will go get olive oil from the kitchen before I let it come to that.”

“The fancy olive oil only used for special occasions that your family sent from Italy? It’s that dire?” Johnny said.

“I’d use that for you in a heartbeat,” Daniel said, “If this won’t open I’ll break open the fancy stuff.”

“Don’t we have like 20 bottles of lube around somewhere?” Johnny asked.

Daniel sighed leaning forward and kissing him on the nose. “We do. I just didn’t want to have to go get it. But I also want to have sex tonight, and clearly that’s not going to happen if I keep fighting with this one bottle.”

“Want me to try?” Johnny asked.

“No,” Daniel said. “With the current luck you’d somehow dump it over your head or strain something. Just stay there looking pretty, I’ll be back.”

Daniel gently put his leg back down patting his thigh and then slid off the bed looking around trying to remember where the nearest box that had lube in it was.

“Are we…out?” Johnny called after a bit, after Daniel had thrown Johnny’s summer robe on to go look around.

The idea that they were out was hilarious. After so long of Daniel just

storing lube and condoms in boxes and little containers everywhere to be out….after living with his mom where they made a hefty dent in what she automatically put in his bathroom…after all the shopping they did. It seemed impossible.

Johnny rolled onto his side, pushing open his bed side table drawer. He had a few containers that he set aside, just in case. And they were…right.

Daniel had worn his stupidly short shorts and had been working on his car, long legs sticking out of the hood when Johnny had gotten home and Johnny had asked if Daniel needed help with something specific.

It'd been bad. Embarrassingly cheesy. Horrifically awful flirting but since it'd been a while Johnny had used more then normal just to be careful, to not hurt him. And Daniel had wanted to go again. And they'd used up the rest of the bottle.

Why hadn't he bought another one?

Because there were always like 50 hidden ones somewhere in the nearest vicinity. Like somehow he knew the most pervy easter bunny on the planet.

He sighed pressing his cheek against his forearm.

"You look so lonely," Daniel said. "I take it you missed me."

"Of course," Johnny said carefully sitting up. "You look good in my robe."

"Do I?" Daniel asked giving a spin.

Johnny smiled. "Yes. So what did you find?"

"Well…I got complacent. I realized we ran out of yours last week when you were more then generous. And that that stuck bottle is my last one."

"So you're going to uncuff me and we're going to go shopping?" Johnny asked.

"Ah, no. No for your birthday we're going to break open the fancy olive oil from Italy."

"You can't."

“The fun part,” Daniel said plopping down next to him and holding out the bottle. “Is that it comes with this fancy little spout.”

Johnny frowned, curling his legs towards himself. “If you do what I think you’re insinuating, we can never ever use that olive oil for anything ever again.”

“I know. It’s so tempting,” Daniel said with a sigh. “But I also don’t want it to hurt you….so not this time.”

“You think it’d hurt?”

“Well it’s metal. So not this time. But I think I’ll reuse this container for lube later. After we finish the oil.”

“Lube is going on our shopping list.”

“Yeah. I mean I go through and throw it out if it expires. I just didn’t realize so much of it was gone after my last run through. I wasn’t expecting what we threw out from the Avanti this afternoon to have been the end of it. That the last one we had would be stuck.”

Daniel set the jar down and took off the summer robe, carefully repositioning himself, gently pulling Johnny towards him.

“Sorry for making you wait.”

“I’m okay.”

“How’s the arm? The wrist?”

“Fine.”

“Let me see if I remember the information I got,” Daniel said leaning down and kissing him.

Johnny had asked for a billion kisses at one point. And he had, lost track of how many they’d had. He just knew that they were nowhere near a million.

What were his favorite kisses?

The first one they had where Daniel had been drunk and surprised him in the closet at Jimmy’s.

Not because it was good, oh it’d been awful. A taste of stale beer and pizza in a humid closet was not a great combo. But he liked how

honest it had been. He hadn't realized it at the time, too shocked but Daniel had gone for everything he wanted. Everything he always went for in that moment. He touched Johnny, skipping to what? Second base in their first kiss?

Drunken kisses from Daniel weren't perfect but they were fun. Because Daniel was immensely confident even when he missed. Even if he had had so many drinks he was kissing the side of Johnny's mouth.

He liked the ticklish kisses Daniel sometimes went for when he was in a playful mood, like a bird pecking away, or just amused by the sound until Johnny had curled up in a ball to avoid the onslaught, usually laughing.

He liked when Daniel was working at home, going through paperwork or checking over the books for the shop and kissing the top of his head. He liked putting his hands on Daniel's shoulders and the way he looked up at Johnny, tired but always taking it as time to stop. Leaving himself open for attack.

He liked kissing Daniel's forehead, his nose, listening to Daniel laugh and say "Okay okay, I'm coming." And kissing him under his jaw and along his neck where his shoulder and neck met and how he shrugged like the suddenness of it tickled.

He liked when they play fought. Rolling around over something and how Johny went for any exposed skin he could find, kissing Daniel's soft belly and the way his body would tense up because it was ticklish, kissing his sides, his hips. Nonsense games with no rules except unsaid ones where Johnny felt like he won when Daniel was breathless under him and Johnny got to kiss him as much as he wanted. He won, even if he lost.

He liked the kisses that were greetings. Good morning kisses before words could be formed. Sleepy good night kisses. Welcome home kisses and have a good day kisses. Or see you later kisses.

But this type of kiss, slow, languid, sweet as molasses, unhurried and warm were his favorite. The kind where time felt slower. Responsibilities, stress it didn't matter. His focus just became on kissing Daniel.

Daniel pulled away gently taking Johnny's free hand in his, lacing their fingers and pressed a finger against him that was cool and slick feeling from the oil.

"Ready?" Daniel asked.

Johnny nodded, bracing himself, digging on heel into the bed as he felt the intrusion. Quickly distracted by Daniel kissing him working love bites onto his neck that were enough.

Normally Daniel's hands were on him. On his chest, his hips, his thighs, his dick, touching, rubbing and squeezing. But like this, holding his hand, there was just the press of Daniel's body against his, the intrusion of fingers as one became two became three, and Daniel's mouth on his. It was an absence but also anchoring. There was nowhere to go, nowhere he needed to be, except right there, right where Daniel wanted him was where he wanted to be.

He did want to touch him, wanted to run his hands down Daniel's back, touch wherever he could reach, kiss him everywhere he could.

"I think it'll be okay now," Daniel said, shifting his weight slightly, removing his fingers and guiding his dick slowly inside.

Why did everything still get stuck in his throat? Not the moans, though maybe those still go trapped a little.

Was he scared that if he told Daniel he liked it, enjoyed it as much as he did that Daniel would stop? That he'd leave?

No.

He wouldn't.

Because Daniel had seen him at his worst. Had withstood Johnny being a shit to him and still had heard his apology and then came looking. Looked closer at him, inspecting all the little cracks and holes in his armor and the walls he'd put up and decided, this mess of a man, I'll take him. And he clearly liked this, pinning Johnny to the bed and Johnny...felt safe.

Daniel always made him feel safe and wanted, even when he felt awful.

Daniel found little ways to cheer him up, making him a cup of tea in his favorite mug or just kissing his ear. Or adding to Johnny's library because he saw a book he thought Johnny would like. Or making his favorite food.

Hell, giving him a Firebird because the Avanti needed to be retired

and Johnny couldn't bring himself to do it. He liked looking at the car magazines Daniel brought home but never made any move to change it, because it was his car.

Daniel...Daniel wanted to know. Because he sometimes needed reassurance too. The way Johnny did. He had his own spirals, and who knew what set this one off.

A magazine at the doctors that said something dumb like Is your partner faking it? That created a seed of doubt that sprouted.

Or maybe he'd been talking to Ali again and started worrying about Ali's relationship with Johnny versus their own. Because that one cropped up from time to time no matter how many times Johnny squashed it. Thankfully less frequently as the years went on.

Or maybe someone at work had just gotten broken up with or a divorce and in the midst of an argument learned that their sex life had been bad and hadn't realized and it had settled like a burr in his brain.

But the difference was Daniel paid a ton of attention to Johnny. He was gentle, patient, caring and loving when Johnny didn't feel like he deserved it. And when he needed it the most.

"Daniel, I love you."

"I love you too."

"I like this."

"Yeah?"

"I feel safe."

"You do?"

"Yeah. I..mm..like...ah," Johnny gasped.

Daniel's hand had moved to his dick and he lost the thread of thought he had, arching into Daniel's hand.

"What do you like?" Daniel asked kissing his neck.

"This," Johnny managed.

"Me too," Daniel said.

There was more he wanted to say but couldn't. More that got stuck in his throat. But it was okay. He could take his time. He'd figure it out. One day. For now though, Johnny wanted to touch him. Wanted to wrap his limbs around Daniel and hold him close.

He hooked his other leg around Daniel's waist, shifting himself slightly and gasping as he felt Daniel deeper, listening to him curse, not an angry curse but one of surprise and pleasure.

"Are you sure about the shower?" Daniel asked voice thick.

"Huh?"

"The wall, you said it went deeper. Did you like that?'

"Yeah," Johnny said. "Yeah but, shower...ah... death?"

"So a wall."

"Okay," Johnny said. "But...uh..only ..."

"Don't hurt myself?" Daniel asked.

Johnny nodded kissing the skin closet to him.

He was done trying to focus. Daniel wasn't going to let him.

Which was fine. It was kind of nice not to think and just to feel. Because he was somewhere where that was okay. To just move to meet Daniel wherever he could because he wanted to feel more.

He'd spent a long time pushing down his feelings, trying to sort them into boxes because Kreese wouldn't teach him if he cried and Sid never wanted to hear him be it laughter or tears or anything. So whenever anything got too much he exploded. Which Daniel had witnessed first hand. And now, now that feeling didn't exist any more. Not to the same extent.

He got overwhelmed but when he felt like crying he cried, when he got upset, he found ways to deal with it that he felt better about.

Breathing, gardening, working out, spending time with Daniel or on his own, reading. It all helped. And maybe it'd take forever to figure it out, to re-sort and unpack all those feelings he'd pushed down over and over and over again. And it was okay. He wasn't going anywhere. He was right where he wanted to be.

When Daniel let go of his hand and uncuffed Johnny's other wrist when it was over his arms felt like they were floating and he sat for a bit, curled up with Daniel as he felt his arms come back to normal while Daniel rubbed them, trying to help get the blood flowing a little bit better again.

"So?"

"So?"

"Did you like that?" Daniel asked softly.

"Yes."

"Then next time we can try both your hands."

"Not every time," Johnny said.

"You let me know and I'll be prepared," Daniel said.

"Did you enjoy it?" Johnny asked wiggling his fingers and rolling his wrists.

"I did. A lot. I don't know, I kind of like pinning you down or handcuffing you to the bed. Reminds me of sparring and it's comforting knowing I've got you and you're not going anywhere. I mean I know you're not going anywhere. You wake me up now when you can't sleep, but I guess I also found this hot? I'm glad I didn't get the uncool handcuffs."

"There's uncool handcuffs?"

"I mean do you want pink fluffy ones? Those are the other ones I usually see."

"No thank you."

"I didn't think so," Daniel said with a laugh. "And I'm glad you're up for trying a wall again. But we'll find a way to be careful about your back and so that you feel comfortable and less freaked out about my knee."

"It's not just your knee," Johnny said softly. "I don't want you to fall at all. Or hurt yourself."

"We're a long ways off from that I hope."

"Injuring yourself during sex? I don't know, didn't you read those articles about people who get stuff stuck or like a concussion?"

"What articles are you reading?"

"It's in one of the magazines...I can't remember which one."

"There's what? A dear editor please help section for ‘help I grievously hurt myself during sex, what do you recommend for next time’?"

"I think it was a collection of stories of how people hurt themselves from sex. Like leg cramps."

"That doesn't sound nearly as grievous."

"But still-"

"I know," Daniel said kissing Johnny's temple. "I'll be careful. If you get too heavy then I'll just lie down and you can do all the work."

"I do like it you know?"

"Hmm?"

"Having sex with you," Johnny said gently lacing their fingers. "However we do it. I like trying new things with you. I'm not going anywhere and if I'm unsatisfied I'll let you know. So don't worry about it okay? Which I know does absolutely nothing to alleviate your worry when it crops up. But let me know if you're not....satisfied too. Okay?"

"I could do more."

"More?"

"Have more sex."

"What?"

"I'm satisfied but I'm also letting you know that while we're young, maybe we should do it as much as possible before those ads on TV are directed at us."

"What ads?"

"The ones about not being able to do it."

"That's what you've been worried about?"

"I mean it just got me thinking, okay? One day we might get there. One day my dick might not get hard for one reason or another. So I want to make sure I know everything you like so you can still get off if my guy fails in the heat of the moment."

Johnny laughed maybe too hard for Daniel's serious tone.

"That doesn't just happen when you're old. It can happen any time for any reason."

"I know but right now that's not a problem."

"Getting boners every time you turn around huh?"

"I blame you."

"Me? Why? What am I doing?"

"Existing."

"And that makes you hard?"

"Yes."

"How does that make sense?"

"I don't know. Love? Lust? A brutal combo? Luck?"

"Luck?"

"Yeah. I've got you in my bed."

"Our bed."

"Even better. What? I don't cause you unfortunate incidents?" Daniel asked with a faux pout.

"I think I'm just better at hiding it."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"Then how often?"

"How often what?"

"How often do you randomly get horny about me?"

"More often then I'd like to admit."

"See? So we should be having more sex."

"How much more do you want to have?"

"Four times a day at least."

"We don't have enough time for that."

"Can we both quit our jobs and do nothing but have sex?"

"How are we going to explain that to anyone?"

"We've joined a cult."

"What cult is just never ending sex?"

"Aren't all cults weird sex things?"

"Pretty sure they're not."

"What's that Greek god of parties and sex?"

"Dionysus?"

"Yeah that one. Could we swing that?"

"I doubt it."

Daniel sighed pressing his cheek against Johnny's shoulder.

"To be fair, I think I just miss you a lot during the day. Sex is guaranteed just us time."

"Let's try for date nights then," Johnny said.

"Yeah?"

"Yup. We can swap planning them. Twice a week?"

"Like go out and do stuff date nights?"

"We kind of do that already but we both got busy and now it includes family and friends, and I've been helping with the wedding, so yeah, date nights."

"I like that."

"We'll dust off the date jar."

"Oh I've got stuff to add to that."

"Have you just been adding to the sex jar?"

"No."

"Really?"

"Fine, yes. But I've missed you so like I'll sit at work and be bored in meetings and my brain thinks of you and then it's a hop skip and jump before my libido takes over."

"Go get the date jar and let's add to it," Johnny said.

Daniel nodded and Johnny leaned over to grab his pen and paper. What would be fun? Roller rink? Going back up into the mountains just the two of them, they could go snowboarding and skiing, maybe just ride around on the snowmobiles again, movies, mall.

Daniel liked dressing Johnny up. It might be fun to pick an outfit out for the other. Johnny hadn't done that for him yet. It might be fun to go shopping and buy Daniel a nice outfit.

Daniel returned hoping onto the bed again next to him, stealing a piece of paper from Johnny's notebook, quickly scribbling his own ideas to add to the jar that sat between them.

The Dandelion and the Rose

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"To the happy couple," Johnny said holding up his glass.

He hadn't slept much. But, the flower arrangements were perfect, the lights, the design, the seating, the food.

The wedding had been perfect.

Jimmy looked so happy sitting next to Jenny.

And Johnny was happy for them.

He was.

He really was.

Except.

He pushed that down. That bubbling darkness that wanted to spread through his veins.

He drank, he walked around, he checked on the cake, he checked on the musicians, he made the announcements for their first dance, he watched them dance. Spinning across the floor in one another's arms. Years together tied up so neatly in a nice bow.

He cheered and drank shots whenever anyone gave him one. Which was frequent, as a pseudo host of the event.

Best man.

He wanted to laugh at the title.

It sat awkwardly on his head.

The best man should've known more stories about Jenny and Jimmy's relationship. Best man didn't feel right.

Bobby, Bobby felt like best man material.

Any of the cobras but him.

He leaned against Dutch who patted his chest fondly, murmuring in his ear drunkenly that this was great.

"Who'd have expected Jimmy to be the first of us to get married huh?"

Johnny nodded.

That was the thorn sticking into his skin. The one he kept brushing against and trying to ignore. To forget it was there.

He wanted to focus on them, on their happiness. On who they were, their future.

He wanted to focus on it in a positive light. Not the bitterness that kept swelling up. A small toxic jealously that he'd staved off since Jimmy had told him at the rock concert. Since they'd found him at the chapel in Vegas.

It'd been such a long engagement.

Something they'd had a choice in.

Something they got to choose.

Just like their cakes, their outfits, the location and the food.

Daniel was sitting with his mom and Mr. Miyagi.

His mother, sitting under those lights looked so similar and yet so different from her own wedding that his heart-ached.

He pushed it away. As he had throughout the entire process. All along the way. From the moment he'd dug out his binder from where he'd hidden it away, rechecking out all the wedding stuff at the library that he'd checked out ages ago with a different wedding in mind. Stuff leftover from that scrapped wedding plan.

Bobby had brought a date who was very sweet and made him laugh and it made Johnny's heart hurt. Another spark of jealousy.

He'd probably be next.

The next wedding would probably be Bobby, then maybe Tommy, maybe Dutch and Johnny would help plan wedding after wedding.

Maybe Kumiko would get married soon.

Or Jessica.

Maybe Chozen or Louie.

He'd check on flowers, he'd order cake tastings, guide his friends through the steps, the ones he'd walked with his mother all those years ago, holding her hand as she smiled, stunned that she'd get her dream fairy tale wedding.

That… that was what it always felt like. A fairy tale. A dream come true. The way Sid had knelt down in front of him and smiled, the way he'd ruffled his hair and said they'd have fun together, plan the wedding as a family.

The strange way it had felt to hold both their hands and sit between them as they tried different flavors of cake.

The way Sid listened to him. Laughing and saying, "This kid knows what he likes."

And Johnny had been so full of hope.

He'd gone to help his mom try on dresses, sitting while the shop ladies cooed over how she looked, her eyes however on him asking what he thought as he drank sparkling juice and she had champagne.

She'd looked beautiful in all of them, but only one of them brought excitement to her eyes.

And he realized she couldn't tell.

That the staff couldn't tell.

That they didn't know her well enough to see that she was shining.

That she didn't trust her own instincts well enough to know.

That she was glowing with happiness in it. So full of hope and dreams.

Weddings were...dreams. Two different stories carefully put together, tied in such a way that the story could continue on together. To say in front of friends and family, acquaintances and people of some level of importance that this person is the person I pick. They've got my back and I've got theirs. They're my favorite, out of the billions of people on this earth. This is the one I choose. I love them and they love me.

He'd gotten a nice suit and he got to help pick out the flowers in his mothers bouquet, all full of love and hope and he got to pick out the ones he wore on his chest.

It was exactly like a fairy tale.

His mother got to get a dress and they wouldn't even let her look at the price tag.

Because Sid had already given them the card.

It was already paid for.

No one mentioned it to her.

But years later, when looking at wedding dresses trying to figure out how much they cost to try and give Sid an estimate for his own wedding, he saw how exorbitant the price was. And it still had to be tailored. That was an additional fee.

Out of curiosity he'd just gone to a regular store and found a nice white dress that was cheaper and was shocked at the difference. For a moment he'd thought that maybe he was just that out of touch with clothing.

But no, wedding dresses were expensive.

He got a quote.

He went looking at rings, figured out how much they cost, how much it cost to inscribe them.

Sid had told him to come back with an estimate. And he remembered standing in Sid’s office with his findings. It would be expensive.

Cakes weren't expensive, but wedding cakes were.

The flower arrangements, the place to host it.

He had spent months doing all that work and he had put together the binder. Like the one he'd made with his mom when planning her wedding with Sid.

It was more like a scrapbook and he'd worked very hard on it.

Nervous because this was his shot at freedom.

All held down in scrap booking stickers and glossy magazine cut outs.

The only scrapbook he'd ever made because he'd thought Ali would like it. She liked that sort of thing.

Sid had flipped through it silently so vastly different then when he'd looked through the one his mother and he had brought. He'd laughed then and smiled at that one. Delighted by every page, it was easy, it was doable, had Johnny helped? How sweet.

Now when he heard that in his head, it was different.

He'd thought it was genuine the first time. That Sid was happy Johnny was there, happy he was participating so heavily a part of the planning, happy to have him help eat cake and taste the foods they were going to offer, asking the chef what things were because he didn't know. He'd never had a chance to try at least half the food they'd offered. He'd never had it.

But now when he looked on the memory he was pretty sure there was a hint there. A slight sneer. A little clue that if he'd been wiser he would've caught. If they hadn't been fooled so easily by a wolf in sheep's clothing then maybe they would've run.

But they also might not have. He didn't know how bad things were exactly.

But when it was his turn, when everything relied on Sid's desire to get rid of him, to tie himself to the Mills, to rub elbows with people who'd come to celebrate a couple they didn't know or care about, he was so nervous he thought he'd be sick. But he stood tall, he stood still, the way he did when Kreese was stalking through the dojo barking orders, lecturing. The way he knew not to flinch.

"So, this number, that's about how much it's going to cost to get rid of you, huh?"

It wasn't an actually question. Sid didn't want to hear him respond. He'd learned that lesson a long time ago. He just waited.

"Ali Mills is well worth this much. I'll give you a card, but I want receipts. For everything. Start with a ring. Buy the ring and you've got until graduation to ask her. I want you out of this house by the time you turn 18, understand?"

"Yes sir."

Sid slid the binder hard across his desk.

Johnny caught it.

He wasn't supposed to catch it.

He wasn’t supposed to save it.

But he had, it was his ticket, his well thought out plan.

And his mother had worked on it with him. Had sat with him talking about things Ali liked, helping him pick out table cloths and napkins and silverware.

The plan was buy the ring, ask Ali to marry him, go over the binder with her, get married after graduation, move out and he'd be somewhere out of Sid's clutches but able to keep his mother in his life.

He went to every jeweler he could find, being very picky.

The first key to his escape.

The first key to his future lay in a ring in the hopes that the girl he offered it to would say yes and unknowingly save him.

He found one he liked.

He saw it and thought no one could say no to that one.

And then the funeral had happened.

And then Sid had lost it.

And he hadn't made it to her birthday.

And the ring became a weight. He'd tried to win her back. Desperate. Desperate to hold onto that dream. That fairy tale. Just like his mother had had. But she moved on and Johnny had to make alternative plans.

He slept on the beach more.

He drove around more.

He went camping.

He thought about running away.

But it was unfair.

Everything was so unfair and he took it out on Daniel. Daniel who didn't know that he'd stepped unknowingly so close to the switch that had shut off his future. That he'd accidentally turned off all the lights on Johnny.

He wanted that normalcy, what he'd expected, dreamed, hoped for, everything he'd been working towards.

Freedom.

And just like that it was gone.

But then, when the dust settled he realized maybe it would've been hell. He'd have been indebted to Sid from the first step into his future.

He wouldn't be free.

Sid could use it as leverage.

And Ali wouldn't have been happy. She'd liked Johnny but she didn't know him. And he realized he didn't know her. He hadn't let her in.

If he had then maybe things would’ve gone differently. Maybe he wouldn’t have snapped so hard when it ended.

He had envisioned them in some small house outside of the Hills, unsure of what he'd do while she went to school. And that was part of the danger.

She'd have resented that. She'd grown up and he hadn't.

She'd had ambitions and they were so high that she needed help reaching them but she didn't need his help.

He'd put too much pressure on their relationship. Pressure he hadn't told her. And now he wasn't surprised it'd crumbled apart.

They'd had fun.

They'd had something kind of sweet.

But it wasn't meant to last.

Daniel got up and walked to him, carefully taking the glass he was holding from his hands and setting it down. It'd get lost and taken away by a server, he'd never finish that drink.

As soon as it left his hands it was gone.

"Can we dance? Or you still busy?" Daniel asked.

Johnny went through his checklist. The dances had been announced, all the important ones, he'd given his speech. He'd taken all the photos he was supposed to.

He was free until it was time for them to go. Until the party was over. Until someone needed him. Then he had to help with clean up, make sure the guys got to the hotel okay, that Jimmy and Jenny got to where they needed to go.

He could dance.

"Yeah," Johnny said stepping towards Daniel, maybe misjudging it and getting a little too close.

Daniel grinned at him. "Hoo boy, you are drunk. Who did this to you? You sure dancing won't make you sick?"

"I'll be fine," Johnny said.

"I'm going to take your word on that," Daniel said taking his hands and leading him to the dance floor.

He couldn't imagine now doing this with Ali. It was all he'd dreamed of for almost a full year. Maybe almost 2. Ever since Sid had told him he'd done well to get a date with Ali and started paying for his dates.

Sid had actually talked to him when he dated Ali. He hadn't ignored him as much as he had before. It wasn’t just anger and violence but sometimes something civil if you squinted.

Daniel had turned out the lights, but had illuminated a new doorway, a new path he hadn't ever seen, that he hadn't know existed.

And this, this was nice, this was easy. To dance with Daniel felt like second nature. He knew Daniel so well, knew how to read him, even drunk, he was so easy to follow.

He was in good hands.

Great hands.

Beautiful lovely talented hands.

He loved those hands.

Daniel was looking at him and smiling, laughing softly. "Good to know Johnny. I was worried. You've been tense all night."

"I have?"

He'd hoped he wasn't that easy to read.

"Not noticeable except to people who really know you, I asked Dutch and he just said weddings are a lot of work and then gave me a shot."

"There's a lot for a best man to do."

"I've been listening to all your phone calls and saw your planning and the pile of books you checked out from the library. But it's not that. You've been uncomfortable since Jimmy asked you to be his best man. So what's eating you?"

Did he say it? It sounded so damn childish.

"I'm jealous. I'm trying not to be."

"Jealous? Of who?"

"Them."

"Jimmy and Jenny?"

"Yeah. I'm happy for them but I'm jealous."

Someone was waving to him and he sighed, he kissed Daniel's cheek.

"I gotta go, sorry."

It was a lot. He was taking pictures, answering questions, and before he knew it it was over.

He'd seen Daniel such a frustratingly short time.

Daniel had brought him food, cornering him and asking him if he'd eaten and when he'd said no, a little woozy but full of booze, Daniel had made him eat, not letting him leave his corner.

He wasn't sure if Daniel had had a good time.

He'd probably should've spent more time with him. He waved off Jenny and Jimmy, the last to leave and then turned back to the empty hall.

Staff were cleaning and he helped fold chairs and carry them to the back, he helped sweep up confetti and colorful streamers.

He made sure, with a checklist he'd made before he'd had all the alcohol he'd been given, that everything was done.

He drank one more shot with the staff before heading to his own room.

Jimmy was married.

He felt tears prick his eyes. He was very happy for Jimmy. He'd graduated, again, was starting at a firm and now was married, he was heading off to Spain for the honeymoon.

Johnny leaned against the walls of the elevator.

It was another goodbye. Not a full one. But Jimmy would probably start a family. He'd be busy.

Johnny would have conversations with small children screaming for attention in the background.

Jimmy had finally found himself. He'd found who he wanted to be after so long of knowing that he didn't want to do the one thing expected of him and he was doing well and Johnny was so damn proud.

So damn proud of that man who'd hugged him tight before getting in that car.

He'd probably do that three more times. Possibly more.

Life was changing.

It always was.

Though it felt like he hadn’t. Like he was stuck.

He walked down the hall a little wobbly towards his room, counting the numbers as he went.

Jimmy's cousins room, his parents, his own mothers room, Lucille's, Mr. Miyagi's, the guys, one, two, three.

He turned.

That was him.

He unlocked the door.

Daniel was sitting on the couch watching TV. He had some cake he'd snagged from the wedding, still wearing his suit but the shoes were off, sitting shiny near the door.

"Hey, they're on their way to Spain?"

"Yeah," Johnny said carefully getting out of his shoes, stumbling a little and then heading towards the bed, flopping onto it with a sigh.

"You okay?" Daniel asked, leaning over him from the side of the bed.

Johnny pulled him down into a kiss.

He tasted like cake. Sweet, incredibly sweet.

Daniel pulled back a little looking down at him.

Did he know how pretty he was?

How absolutely stunning?

How his big brown eyes were so captivating?

He could just get lost in Daniel's eyes.

Some people liked being in the spotlight, he liked being in Daniel's view, liked being the center of his attention.

Maybe it was childish.

Maybe it was silly.

But he liked it.

Felt seen.

But not in a bad way.

A good way.

A way that made his skin tingle, like how your hair stands on end. But in a good way.

Other people got that right? A good spine tingle?

Oh and his mouth.

His mouth was wonderful.

Full of so many words.

Johnny liked words.

He loved words.

It was like a waterfall of words.

Very comforting.

And!

And his mouth tasted like cake.

And it felt nice on his mouth.

Good kisses.

Daniel was smiling down at him.

Was he talking?

Someone was talking.

Oh.

It was him.

Daniel tucked Johnny's hair behind his ear and Johnny leaned into the touch.

"How much did you drink?" Daniel asked.

Johnny frowned.

He held up his hand.

They had champagne at the start.

And then there was wine with the bridesmaids.

Maybe four shots?

No five.

Jimmy's parents wanted to drink with him.

Then the wedding toast.

Then one more shot with the staff.

He held up both hands.

"Have you eaten anything?"

"You fed me."

"I did, but was that it?"

"Busy, so very busy."

"The food was good tesoro you should've eaten more of it," Daniel said carefully moving to lay down next to him on his side, head in his hand. "You know, I don't think I've ever seen you this drunk before. Vegas was close but you'd were more sobered then this."

"No?" Johnny tried to remember.

He closed his eyes because their room was too bright.

"Sid said You will be just like your dad, a deadbeat, drunk. You will die in a ditch, drunk. I don't know my dad. But I know I don't want to be anything Sid wants me to be. Thinks I'll be. It's very easy to just drown myself. I...I could've....I think I would've. Stopped trying to swim. I don't want to drown. Want to remember, errything," Johnny opened his eyes looking at Daniel. "You. Wanna remember you. And friends. Want to remember good thing and be happy. But..." he brought his hand down on his own chest harder than he meant and it made a loud thump. "Failed."

"What do you mean? What did you fail at? The wedding was lovely and you worked very hard."

"Jealous. Shouldn't be jealous. Should be happy. Jimmy's married. Jimmy finally decided who he is, who he wants to be. I'm very proud of him," Johnny said with a sniff rubbing at his face.

He really was proud of Jimmy. So damn proud. How many times had he listened to Jimmy cry about how his parents wanted him to do something he didn't want to do? How he didn't know how to not be miserable his whole life? Jimmy cried, so so much. Until he figured it out. Until he found his own path.

"Jealous? You mentioned that earlier, who are you jealous of?" Daniel asked hand on his torso, under the jacket.

Not grabbing, not reaching, not squeezing, just a gentle stroke over his shirt.

"I'm going to do this three more times. Three more times at least. Probably more. Like Kumiko. Or- or Jessica. Your family's big. We might have weddings to go to there. What am I going to do if I feel this awful at each one? I should be happy for them but I'm not as happy as I should be."

Daniel leaned in over him, close.

"Johnny, what's wrong? What do you want?"

"I shouldn't want to. I mean look how it worked out with Sid? Sid was nice once. Can you believe that? When my mom got married he was like a prince in a fairy tale, coming in to whisk her away. To save us. And he was nice to me. Or I thought he was. It took me a long time to realize it wasn't me. That the guy I met at first and up until the honeymoon he took Mom on was fake. A mirage. And the real man was the awful person I lived with after.

“He gave me a card you know? Told me go buy a ring. Marry Ali. He'd pay for it all. And I thought I'd escape. Be free. That was my future. That's all I planned. Can you believe that? The guys planned college, they planned all this stuff and I planned just marrying Ali. I planned so much of it too. Because Sid wanted to see how much it'd cost to get rid of me. So I'd already done most of the ground work. It's how I knew to do this," Johnny said waving at the air.

"I already had looked at hair styles and make up, already found the best of everything. Where's the best place to get married. Where's the best food. Where's the best spots for photo shoots. Best tailor for the suits and dresses. How much it costs for the suits and the dresses. I'd already picked out flowers and bouquets and— and these," Johnny said pulling the boutonnière carefully from his suit and holding it up.

"I'd already bought the ring you know? To ask. Took months to find it.

And then everything fell apart. And it's for the best, and I shouldn't want something that's burned me twice. Twice. You'd think I'd learn my lessons. But I want it to work once. A fairy tale that has a happy ending. Though why it's always a wedding I don't know. But I want one. Even if I don't deserve one."

"Hey now, that's not true," Daniel said hand on his face, thumb brushing through tears.

Daniel's voice was so soft, his eyes so gentle, he was partially laying on top of Johnny. He took the boutonnière from Johnny, twirling it between his fingers.

Such nice fingers.

Talented.

"You deserve to be happy Johnny. Does it have to be official official?"

"Hmm?" Johnny said looking up from Daniel's fingers back up to those beautiful eyes.

"Does the marriage you want have to be official? Like with government documents. Or can it just be the party and the ceremony?"

"The official stuff means not being left out," Johnny said softly.

"Left out?"

"If you get hurt...I can't be there."

"What do you mean you can't be there?"

"They don't let people come in unless they're family."

"So you're worried I'll get hurt?"

"Or I will. I'd want you with me," Johnny said softly. "I mean right now...all I've got who can do that is mom. I want you."

Daniel smiled softly at him.

"Me huh? Not thinking about Ali with all of this wedding stuff?"

"I am," Johnny said. "It would've been easy. But it would've been bad. She didn't know that I'd put all that pressure on our relationship. I

didn't tell her. I didn't tell her she was my escape plan."

"You still have an escape plan?"

"No. I don't want to escape anywhere. Well except maybe out of these pants and this jacket. They're too warm. I used to dream about going somewhere else. Then I met Ali and thought my escape could be a person. Then that fell through. And then-"

Daniel had moved off of him so he sat up taking off his jacket, he was too hot.

Everything was too hot.

He struggled with his tie.

It'd been easy that morning.

Daniel leaned forward and carefully undid it.

Johnny wanted to kiss his fingers.

He did.

"Because of Mr. Miyagi, because of you, I saw my life a little better. I saw who was there, who had my back, I was able to not just survive. Because that's all I was doing. I was able to slow down and be and I wanted to stay. I kept having nightmares though."

Daniel carefully freed his hands and took Johnny's tie off, set it aside and carefully set about unbuttoning everything.

"Sid would have had the servants kick me out, earlier. I figured he'd cut me off once I turned 18. That he'd try to find a way to get rid of me. Because he'd said he wanted me gone. Married off before then. I had so many nightmares that he'd throw out all my stuff or put me on a plane or drive me out into the desert. I couldn't sleep. I was so worried I'd wake up somewhere far away unable to find my way back. And I wanted to come back. I wanted to be with you, with my friends, near Mom."

Daniel pulled back and Johnny wiggled out of his dress clothes, his shirt, his pants letting them fall onto the floor.

"You want something to eat? Want some cake?"

Cake.

Right.

Johnny leaned over kissing him.

Daniel smiled and shook his head. "That was not an answer."

"You taste like cake."

"I'll be right back," Daniel said slipping off the bed and getting the cake and a bottle of water.

Johnny watched him.

He looked good in his suit shirt and slacks.

The tailor had done a good job.

Daniel at some point had unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled them up and his forearms looked golden in the dim light.

"I love you."

"I love you too," Daniel said sitting next to him. Handing him the cake and the bottle of water. "Normally I'd throw that to you but I don't think you can catch much right now."

"Everything about you is stunning. I want to look at you and also it hurts to look at you."

"It hurts huh?"

"Blindingly beautiful," Johnny said taking a bite of the cake.

It was good.

Jimmy and Jenny had good taste.

He wondered if it as easy to come to an agreement about cake.

"What kind of cake do you like?"

"Coconut and caramel."

Johnny nodded thoughtfully, coconut caramel sounded good.

He took another bite.

Daniel opened up the water and passed it to him.

Johnny took a drink. Then looked back down at the cake. "This is your cake though."

"I had cake. I brought it because I wasn't sure if you'd gotten any."

Johnny stared at him, vision blurring.

"Thank you," Johnny said setting it down and hugging him tight. "That was so sweet. You're so sweet. I'm so lucky."

Daniel hugged him back just as tightly and it was nice, so nice to be pressed in so close to Daniel.

He was still wearing his suit and he looked so good in it.

He looked good in everything.

In nothing.

He was beautiful.

Stunning.

And he gave such good hugs.

He had such a great mind and a keen eye.

He noticed things Johnny didn't think anyone else would notice.

He thought of things he didn't think other people thought.

Johnny hadn't had any of the cake and he thought that was fine.

But Daniel had saved him some.

Kept it safe in their room, waiting for him.

He didn't want to let go.

He wanted to keep Daniel in his arms.

He wanted to feel his skin against his.

Because it always felt nice.

Daniel was always soft, felt nice under his finger tips.

His hair was always soft.

He smelled nice.

How did you tell someone that you loved them so much in a moment that it hurt your heart?

Because he did.

So much that he couldn't see straight.

"I love you too," Daniel said softly, his hand was in Johnny's hair and his breath was warm against his neck.

He pressed a kiss there.

Johnny picked up his cake and took another bite.

"What kind of cake do you like?" Daniel asked, arms hooking around him as they moved curling up together against the headboard legs intertwined.

"Almost all cakes. I only ever got cake on my birthday...or Moms after she married Sid. She never got a cake for herself when I was little. Not that I could remember. She got me cupcakes.

“I figured it out once, she'd ask the bakeries if they had any cupcakes they'd sell by themselves, because usually they do the sets? The dozens or half dozens. I'd be at the bakery with her looking at everything but I never asked for anything because I didn't think we'd get anything. I just liked looking. They were pretty. And they'd seem to realize that she couldn't afford the packs. I don't know if she told them. She might've. But she'd always manage to afford one. They were different every year.

“She always told them I wasn't picky. And it was true. I didn't get anything like that otherwise. So she'd get me a cupcake and we'd celebrate in our apartment or on the beach at night. We had one candle we stuck in it that got smaller and smaller over the years and she had match books she got for free from the restaurant she worked at.

“Sid though, thought I was spoiled and made a joke of it. Had the staff make me a princess cake every year. I'm sick of those."

"A princess cake? What's that?"

"It's a Prinsesstårta, a Swedish cake. It's sponge cake, with cream and

raspberry jam covered in whipped cream and a green marzipan. I didn't like the jam. But Mom liked them and Sid always liked his joke and people like to eat it when they came for my birthday parties. It was for other people not me. So anything except that."

"You deserve cakes you like," Daniel said softly.

"You like coconut and caramel. Like the girl scout cookies?"

Daniel laughed softly. "Those have chocolate."

"Oh, they do don't they?"

"I do like those though."

Johnny ate another bite of the cake. "This is good cake."

"It is."

"They're going to freeze it now."

"The cake?"

"Yeah, it was taken away and wrapped up and it'll live in a freezer until their anniversary."

"Huh. Won't it get freezer burn?"

"Not if it's done properly."

"Why do they do it?"

"Luck," Johnny said around another bite. "People saved it to eat it after they had a kid. I asked the Browns. You freeze it. Until everything hardens. Then you take it out. Wrap it with uh that sticky plastic stuff."

"Saran wrap?"

"Yeah, that. And then after that's super tight. You do it again with foil. At least three times."

"That seems excessive."

"Not done."

"You're kidding."

"No," Johnny said shaking his head. "Then an air tight container. And you put it somewhere to hibernate for a year."

"Damn."

"All of it, is a lot of work. Even planning."

"This planning you did, was it your dream version? Everything you want?"

"No," Johnny said around a mouthful of cake. "It was everything I knew Sid or Ali would want."

"That's a lot of work for something not for you."

"It was for me though."

"How so?"

"For my freedom."

"You're free now. Right?"

"Yes. But it's sweet right? To say to everyone you know," Johnny said turning to look in those gorgeous brown eyes. "I'm all in, I love you more than anyone else. I bet on us. I bet on our future. To be happy. To be a team. We have each other's back. And I want you all to know that and we welcome you to be a part of our lives. To celebrate love."

Daniel's face was a little pink, a little red. Like his lips.

Johnny kissed him.

He liked kissing him.

"Why do you have a drunk kisses ban? You seem to like it," Daniel asked when he pulled away to drink some of the water.

Johnny stretched, a long slow stretch. It felt better after standing around stiffly, shoulders back all day just in case because of the photographer.

Drunken kisses.

He had pushed Daniel away when he'd been drunk.

He hadn't wanted to.

He took Daniel's hand, interlacing their fingers.

Looking at Daniel's hand, studying it.

He'd said something, what had it been?

He wanted to be remembered.

That's what he always told Ali. And he told Daniel that too.

Hadn't he?

But sitting in that hotel thinking of marriages and something Sid said echoed in his head.

"I don't want to be drunken mistake," Johnny said softly.

That's what Sid had told him one night.

That that was all Johnny was, distilled to the tiniest essence.

Start to end.

Eventually he learned to tune Sid out, to try and not let the barbs stick, embedded in his skin but that was an old one.

One Sid had said with a sneer, so assuredly.

Johnny didn't want his relationships to be that way.

He didn't want someone to pick him because they were drunk. Or like him more because of the alcohol in their system in that moment.

He thought he'd dug it out, but it seemed like it was deeper than he expected.

It'd taken root, and he'd just managed to hurt himself more.

Daniel leaned over him. Gently cupping the side of his face.

"Never," he whispered. "Never a mistake. Not for me."

Johnny reached for him, wanting to pull him into a hug and bury his face in Daniel's shoulder.

But Daniel wasn't budging.

He'd gotten stronger.

It shocked his alcohol addled brain for a moment, the warm tears running down his cheeks as he reached out and gently squeezed Daniel's bicep.

He knew Daniel had been working out.

He'd gotten a gym membership and offered to get one for Johnny too if he wanted.

They'd tried that in West Hollywood and Johnny hadn't been particularly fond of the gym there.

Mostly because people kept coming over to try and correct him. The first ten times was fine, but after that it was just annoying and he'd been on a no gym self ban.

He'd rather go for a run on the beach or work out at home.

But damn.

Daniel was solid.

He was still wearing his suit and surely he was uncomfortable.

Suits were nice, but after a full day in them, after all the dancing and standing around Johnny got itchy.

Claustrophobic.

Just a bit.

Maybe they should arm wrestle. That was how you tested upper arm strength right? Who could pin the other ones hand to the table?

"You're drunk tesoro I'm not going to arm wrestle you."

That was a little disappointing.

Maybe later.

He'd have to remember.

Daniel's boutonnière was pretty.

Johnny had made it himself.

He'd made all of them himself for the guys, for Jimmy, for his own.

It'd saved time and stress of having to collect them and the bouquet from the florist.

But he'd made Daniel's special.

Love.

Cheesy, but every single one, anything related to Daniel he had to add love.

It was impossible not to.

He was lucky. So damn lucky that Daniel picked him.

Liked him.

That he picked Johnny and not Ali.

Daniel was, a beautiful piece of art. But human. Very human.

But in all the best ways.

Like the joy a cat finds in stretching in a sunbeam.

Daniel gave Johnny that feeling.

Daniel leaned down and kissed Johnny's cheeks.

It tickled a little bit.

"I'm glad you picked me too. What flowers would you want at a wedding?" Daniel asked, leaning down, head propped in his hand looking down at Johnny but curled up partially on him, partially beside him.

His other hand rubbing away tears.

That were thankfully finally subsiding.

"Roses."

"Of course."

"Butterfly ranunculus."

"Don't know that one, you'll have to show me."

"Lilac."

"Those smell nice."

"Astilbe, hydrangeia, iris, lavendar."

"Wow, okay. Long list huh?"

Johnny nodded. "I'd need all of them."

"All the flowers? Why?"

"Because they have to make up for the uneven comparison of beauty."

"You lost me."

"They would all pale compared to you. I wouldn't notice even an avalanche of tweedia and zinnia's because my focus would be on you."

"So there's got to be a lot?" Daniel asked, his face was that reddish color again.

Johnny reached up and gently poked his cheek.

Sometimes he just got so lost. But it was fine. Because getting lost with Daniel was an adventure. And those arms had gotten so strong, they'd already been strong. They'd already caught him so many times. So as long as he held on just as tight he couldn't ever really get lost.

"What kind of rings do you like? Gold? Silver? Do you like stones? What kind of rock? Diamonds?"

Johnny frowned wrinkling his nose.

"No to diamonds huh? Hate them that much?"

"Mom had a diamond ring, tried to pawn it off. It was worth nothing."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah," Johnny said. "It's a waste and she ended up cryin' over it for....for... a long time. Think it was her mom's."

"Your grandma?"

"Guess so. The price didn't go up, it went down. I think."

"But they're sparkly," Daniel said.

"And stabby. Have you ever gotten a stone caught on something? Mom

ruined a sweater with the engagement ring Sid bought her."

"So no stabby stone," Daniel said with a soft laugh. "No diamonds. Do you like blue?"

"Yeah."

"Green?"

"Yeah."

"Are their colors you don't like?"

"Did you get a class ring?"

"No."

"Ah. The stones were pretty."

"Class rings huh?"

"Should've given you mine," Johnny said. "If we'd been together before graduating, would've given you mind to wear at school."

"Yeah what's it got on it? School name, year, and what?"

"That's it. School crest."

"Our school had a crest?"

"Yeah. And the mascot."

Daniel laughed softly. "You know where that is?"

"No. But if I find it, I'll put it right here," Johnny said tapping Daniel's ring finger. "Or would you hate it? Half your senior year at that school was awful. I hope the other half was fun."

"It was. I don't know, let me see this monstrosity first," Daniel said with a laugh before his features softened and he kissed Johnny's nose. "I love everything you give me though. And I love the sentiment."

Johnny picked up the hand that Daniel wasn't using to prop himself up and carefully pressed his palm against Daniel's.

There were callouses but Daniel took good care of his hands. Had anyway ever since he'd stopped exhausting himself at that awful

apprenticeship.

He hated that place. Daniel had always been tired and exhausted and sore. And Johnny wasn't particularly good at massages.

He was trying.

But Daniel didn't melt when he did it.

When Daniel gave Johnny one he forgot how to speak sometimes.

What were his hands good at?

Fighting?

Take away fighting and what was left?

A dandelion seed in the wind?

Dandelions were weeds.

Daniel was like a nice rose.

Pretty, beautiful, fought back when you pushed it.

And Johnny was a dandelion.

A dime a dozen.

Floating around aimlessly.

Looking for somewhere to put down roots.

"Put down roots with me," Daniel said. "I like dandelions they're pretty. They hold a lot of magic in them you know?"

Magic in a dandelion?

Johnny frowned wrinkling his nose.

"How can you love flowers but look down on dandelions?" Daniel asked.

"I like dandelions. They're....useful."

"Useful you say, but not pretty."

"They're pretty."

"And tasty."

Johnny frowned.

"Oh come on, we had that dandelion salad last summer at that fancy vegetarian restaurant. And! Jimmy broke out that dandelion wine for us."

Ah.

He did remember the wine.

He'd only had a sip.

Useful.

Maybe being a dandelion wasn't so bad.

"I mean I wouldn't call you a dandelion myself. But I also haven't picked which flower I really associate with you. Lavender? Because of the cookies maybe. But really tesoro, I want you to roll over."

Roll over?

But then he wouldn't be able to see Daniel's pretty face.

"Yes, on your stomach. I'm not going anywhere."

Johnny sighed and rolled over.

"Are you comfortable."

"We doin' somethin' dirty?"

Daniel laughed. "No."

"You sure?"

"Pretty sure."

Johnny shifted a little to get more comfortable and listened to Daniel moving to sit on his back.

"You're floating off on me a little bit. Which I get. I do that all the time. It's kind of cute to watch you, but—"

Johnny felt hands gently press into his back.

"We're going to start somewhere basic. The wedding was gorgeous. You put a lot of time effort and energy to it and even if you feel bad about it because you already did all this prep before and didn't actually get to go through with it...that's okay.

“Jimmy still had a great time. Like there were no issues. The whole thing ran smoothly under your leadership. Because as much as you step back now and just sort of chill at Mr. Miyagi's shop, you're still a leader and people still follow. And you're good at planning things. And this...was a huge ordeal. So hey, good job. Okay? No. Not even a good job. Great job!"

Johnny felt soft lips on his shoulder and Daniel's hands digging into his back, working on knots.

"You planned the bachelor party which ended in Jimmy so overcome by emotions he started sobbing, twice. But the photos are gorgeous. You made sure everything happened on time when it was meant to. You got more drunk this time then I've ever seen and you still kept things going. Your speech was great, I got all teary eyed when you talked about Jimmy and about love. And I know it's a little weird that it's over. I mean they've gone off on their honeymoon....Where'd you wanna go if you got to go on a honeymoon?"

Daniel's voice had changed a little.

A casual question.

"I... never cared about that part," Johnny said. "I mean I figured I wouldn't get a choice."

"Now though?" Daniel asked.

"Italy."

Daniel laughed softly. "Italy? Why Italy?"

Johnny buried his face in the pillow.

Nonnio and Nonnia talked about Italy all the time.

How much they loved going there.

How much they missed it.

They talked so fondly about the food, about places they'd grown up and loved and wished they'd taken their grandkids to see.

And sometimes Daniel got a wistful look on his face, like he wanted to go.

Like he wanted to see those sights and taste the food and walk the roads his grandparents had.

A connection to his father who'd gotten to go when he was younger and it'd been unspoken that Lucille and Daniel's father had planned to take him one day and then...couldn't.

So there was no other place then Italy.

Though he wasn't sure if it was okay for him to say that.

Maybe Lucille still wanted to take Daniel one day.

Maybe it was selfish, but Johnny thought it could be fun.

He wanted to see Daniel in Italy.

He wanted to be part of that adventure.

Even if it was selfish.

His back felt wet. He heard Daniel sniff. Felt his fingers dig into his skin.

"Okay. I like that plan."

What plan?

Johnny turned his head slightly.

He was tired.

So tired.

He yawned.

Daniel was sitting on his back.

Why?

Should he be doing push ups?

But he was on the bed.

"Don't you dare move, I'm giving you a massage. Stay still. Just relax

and enjoy."

"I'm fallin' asleep."

"That's fine. I'll wake you later to brush your teeth."

It was nice.

Daniel's hands were so nice.

Warm.

He was cozy.

He had nothing else to do.

Except make sure he got up before check out time.

All the pressure all the tasks, it was all done.

All that was left was to just relax and enjoy being with Daniel.

He did wish though that they'd gotten to dance more.

Maybe when they got home.

Or maybe before they left.

Chapter End Notes

Prinsesstårta
dandelion salad
dandelion wine

Breathe. Focus. Reflect.

"We gotta go now, I'm not going to be late," Johnny called from the door. "I will leave you behind."

He heard Daniel, a squawk from where he was, the sound of him moving. "Hold on, don't you dare!"

"I promised," Johnny said opening the door and leaning against the frame.

He heard Daniel's footsteps. "You really want to wait by yourself when he's late?"

"No, I'd rather not wait by myself. But I will be there on time without having to rush."

"Let's take the Ford."

"You'll let me drive?"

"Why should you drive? It's my car."

"Because I know LA better. I can get us to the airport faster."

"I've been here a decade. I know my way around. Plus I've been to the airport plenty of times."

"Walk and talk," Johnny said tugging on Daniel's shirt, pulling him towards the door, kissing the top of his head and grabbing the keys, locking the door and following Daniel.

"There was when we went to Okinawa, when we got back from Okinawa, seeing Jessica off, seeing Jessica and Kumiko off, seeing Dutch off, seeing our mom's off on that single's trip, when we went to Tokyo and Seoul, picking Dutch up from the airport, picking Jessica up again, picking Kumiko up again. Picking up Nonnio and Nonnia. Really I think we're just a taxi service. They should start paying us."

Johnny laughed. "It's because we're the closest and have the most flexible schedules."

"It's because you always jump to offer."

"Like you'd let anyone else pick him up."

Daniel frowned, turning to Johnny and snatching the keys from his hand and running the rest of the way to the Ford. "That's why I'm driving."

"Hey," Johnny said running after him, but Daniel had surprised him and already slipped into the drivers seat of the Ford. He had his seatbelt buckled and the motor going by the time Johnny opened the passenger side.

"You snooze you loose."

"Says the guy who hits snooze like every five minutes in the morning."

"Mornings suck."

"They don't. Just weekday mornings when you have to drive through to West Hollywood with Louie."

"Very true," Daniel said as he made his way to LAX. "And you, no backseat driving."

"I'm not in the backseat though."

"Semantics," Daniel said hand on Johnny's thigh.

"Is this why you wanted to drive?"

"I would've done this either way."

"So I could've driven."

"You drove him to the airport."

"You jealous?"

Daniel was biting his lip.

"You are!"

"Well you get to see him all the time!"

"I knew it!"

"It's not fair okay? It's not that..." Daniel sighed. "I miss it okay? I'm jealous that you two get to hang out all the time and I'm off selling cars and being under appreciated."

"Glad you at least realized you're under appreciated."

"I do know! I know that being a car salesmen, even the boss is meetings and meetings and more meetings and numbers and stress and no one cares that I instituted free lunch or made sure everyone gets long breaks. Or how much of a pain in the ass insurance is. And I know that it's not like he's not a part of my life but I miss him okay? You...you're perfect."

Johnny scoffed. "I am not perfect."

"You are at the shop in the morning, you're helping out, you're at their place helping with dinner. You're all zen and balanced and I'm fraying. You took all of his lessons and like soaked them up like a sponge and I'm like spinning out of control. I always am."

"Maybe you should take a day off and hang out with him. Go fishing or something," Johnny said covering the hand on his thigh with his own, then prying it off of him and lifting it up to his lips to kiss, holding Daniel's hand in his.

"Hey, I liked where my hand was."

"Yeah, but I don't trust you."

"What? Why not? I'm not going to try anything."

"Sure you're not."

"I'm an adult you know. I know how to behave."

Johnny smiled, Daniel was sitting up straight, shoulders back, head held high, chin out, slightly offended and trying to make a point.

"I know."

"I'm also older than you. You should respect your elders."

"Yeah?"

"With age comes wisdom."

"And what wisdom do you have to impart?"

"You should go to the dentist every six months and should take your car in to be checked out every six months."

"Teeth and oil changes?"

"I'm just getting started."

"Oh, okay, good because I was going to say they sound like a mom reminder."

"Peanut butter stops hiccups."

"That sounds like a science experiment not wisdom."

"Hey."

"Don't go to bed angry."

"Because you can't fall asleep?"

"Because I want kisses before bed."

"Aha I see. When did I go to bed angry?"

"I'm sure plenty those six months you hated me."

"I didn't hate you. I was just mad because my life was a mess and unfairly took it out on you."

"I know," Daniel said winking at him. "I couldn't get out of your head. And I'm glad, because you couldn't stop thinking of me."

"Is that your wisdom?"

"You've put me on the spot. I mean how am I gonna compare? Like we're picking up the master of wisdom."

"You're overthinking it."

"How?"

"Because you're nervous."

"I'm not nervous."

"You are because of Louisa."

"I am not."

"You're worried that Louisa called him and told him you got her and Louie Jr. mixed up."

"I did not!" Daniel squeaked. "Don't you dare tell him."

"And you're jealous of the girl he stayed with."

"I am not!"

"You're worried that he doesn't have enough room in his heart for two students. But, Daniel, you're not his only student."

"Yeah and I already share him with you. I've made peace with that. But a teen girl? How can I compete with that? Louie--dammit, Louisa said he played like fairy godfather and got her ready for prom. He's my fairy godfather."

"You suck at sharing."

"I do not."

"You really do."

"Like what?"

"You literally shoved yourself between Chozen and I when he was talking to me."

"He can't be trusted."

"It's been almost a decade Daniel."

"He can never be trusted."

"You let him babysit our bonsai."

"He can be trusted with bonsai."

"You don't mind him hanging out with the girls or Mr. Miyagi, or the guys."

"That's fine."

Johnny sighed. "Okay, different one. You don't like sharing your Mom with Louie Jr."

"What?!" Daniel asked.

"If she calls and says she went out and took Louie Jr. to get clothes or for dinner or something your voice goes up an octave."

"It does not."

"It totally does. The point is Mr. Miyagi's home is here. Not Boston. He's got enough room in his heart for you and this girl," Johnny said. "So be nice."

"Be nice?! I am nice! I'm always nice! I'm the nicest of nice."

Johnny leaned over kissing his cheek. "I mean don't make him feel bad about leaving. I'm sure he missed you and everyone else a lot."

"Wisdom. Unfair," he said pulling up next to arrivals.

He parked and flicked on the hazards, resting his hand back on Johnny's thigh and leaning over.

"I can share. I want to share my whole life with you."

Johnny looked at him surprised as Daniel kissed him. His hand moved, higher up, towards his inner thigh. Johnny made a sound that made his skin burn when he heard it.

Daniel grinned pulling away.

"Did you not see that Mr. Miyagi is right there?" Johnny asked, voice barely a whisper.

Daniel blinked, patting Johnny's thigh. "Whoops. I'll go help him."

Johnny buried his face in his hands.

"Hey Mr. Miyagi! Welcome back! How was Boston?"

“Daniel-san! Miyagi happy to be home. Bring Daniel-san and Johnny-san souvenir. Beans.”

“Beans?” Daniel asked carrying the suitcase and putting it in the back of the Ford.

“Ah, long time since Miyagi see Ford.”

“Yeah, thought you’d like to be picked up in it, for old times sake. What’s this about Beans?”

“Boston famous beans. Also buy tea,” Miyagi said with a grin. “Yukie and Sato wanted tea.”

“Tea? They know there’s none in the harbor right?” Johnny asked when Mr. Miyagi got in.

“Hai. But fun joke. Amusing. Boston Tea, and we have small party. Tea party.”

“You’re not going to dump it in the pond are you?”

“No no, fish would not like.”

Johnny had told Daniel to take a day off and spend it with Mr. Miyagi. So he’d called in. Said he’d be out. He felt antsy. Like he was playing hooky or something. But he was the boss, so it was fine right? Then why’d he feel so guilty?

Daniel pulled up to Mr. Miyagi's and parked, walking the familiar path to the backyard. Mr. Miyagi was sitting enjoying some tea.

"Hey Mr. Miyagi."

"Ah Daniel-san," Mr. Miyagi said with a smile. "Tea?"

Daniel nodded sitting down beside him and taking the offered tea. He fiddled with the cup in his hands for a moment.

"I'm glad you're back again," Daniel said. "I missed you while you were in Boston."

"Get in trouble?" Mr. Miyagi asked with a laugh. "Who fight now? Car salesmen?"

"I got into an argument with Tom Cole once Mr. Miyagi, I don't get into actual fights with car salesmen. And it was only because he said I was too young to be a car salesmen and no one would buy from a baby and I told him I was over 20 thank you very much and it's not my fault that he already looks like he's got one foot in the grave and that it's probably because he overcharges his customers which is why they all keep hiking out to West Hollywood to me."

Daniel sighed and then set the cup of tea down.

"I thought I'd be happy, that I'd feel something you know? I've got the dealership and it's doing well enough. I was able to buy Johnny a

Firebird and give it to him for his birthday. I got Ma a new car like as soon as I opened. And I'm in a good relationship. But I just...it doesn't feel right. I feel like there should be, something bigger. Like that every morning I should be excited to get up and kiss Johnny and go to work and I should be the happiest person on earth but...I'm not. I'm not unhappy I'm just not....that. I don't know what's next."

"Ah," Mr. Miyagi said with a nod. "Has Daniel-san stopped?"

"Stopped? What do you mean?"

"Ever since move to California Daniel-san run up a mountain. The mountain never end. Move, big thing. Take a lot to move especially when no choice. Then tormented by Cobras and always running and fighting. Survival mode. Then train with Miyagi. Going to school, training, preparing for big fight with Cobras, date. And then Daniel-san win and see Johnny-san nearly die. Win is a high, witness attempted murder big blow. And then Johnny-san surprise with apology, get angry, upset, because many things, but one thing, one thing bothered Miyagi, red mark on Johnny-sans neck. Johnny-san disappear and confusing feelings made worse. But then Cobras appear. Confusing. Enemies now trying to be friends. Does Daniel-san trust them? Or is it a trap? Still healing from months of cruelty. But then Cobras there. Johnny-san there and fun and confusing. Even more Daniel-san have crush."

"You knew all the way back then?" Daniel asked whirling on the man blushing a dark red.

"Mmm," Mr. Miyagi said thoughtfully. "Daniel-san look at Johnny-san with very specific look. Also always touch. Always find an excuse to touch. Always stand very close. Like magnet. And Daniel-san always talk about Johnny-san. Even if conversation have nothing to do with Johnny-san, somehow find way to talk about him."

Daniel groaned covering his face with his hands flopping back on the deck. "Then why didn't he notice?!"

"Johnny-san also healing, on different journey. But Daniel-san also not notice how Johnny-san move around Daniel-san, how speak to Miyagi about Daniel-san, everything Johnny-san do not just for...redemption but out of love."

"He talked about me with you?" Daniel asked.

"Both boys only talk about other boy," Mr. Miyagi said with a sigh.

"All conversation about other. Miyagi think war long period of life. But six months of liking but not move, feel even longer."

"Hey," Daniel said with a laugh.

"Ah but Daniel-san so busy trying to make Johnny-san see, of not seeing, of living, finally living and busy. Prom, finals, graduation and then Okinawa. Not have to go, but Miyagi know, even if Miyagi say no, boys would've come after anyway. Miyagi very lucky to have such good..."

Daniel sat up smiling softly. "You're right, if we hadn't gotten on that flight with you I think Johnny would've gotten us tickets to the next one. You're so important to both of us. I meant it you know. What I said at the door of the plane."

"Daniel-san say friend, best friend. But Miyagi feel...sometimes...like Daniel-san is a good son."

Daniel looked at Mr. Miyagi shocked, feeling tears prick at his eyes.

Mr. Miyagi smiled tears in his eyes as well. "Boys care much about Miyagi and Miyagi so grateful. Grateful they came, that they were there. Even though it was hard. Even though terrible final summer vacation. And Daniel-san so stressed, about Miyagi, about Fresno, about Johnny-san, about everything in Okinawa."

Daniel laughed softly, a watery laugh and nodded.

"Then come home. And open shop. Together. Co-owners, but Miyagi feel like father and son business. Very happy, think, if son had survived this would have been dream. Mrs. Miyagi and Miyagi and son. Gave up on dream but Daniel-san, amidst ashes of own home, pick up Miyagi dream, dust off and give back. Bad time for Daniel-san. Only get worse as Cobras, new cobras return with new teacher and torment Daniel-san worse then ever before. Survival again. Only survival. Drowning and doing best to reach surface to catch breath moment after moment. And win. Finally win. And enemies gone, squashed and rather than take break. Rather than find a plateau to breathe and rest Daniel-san focus on next thing. Apartment with Johnny-san, go to school and apprentice and busy busy busy busy. So busy that Daniel-san get sick and Johnny-san have to fight Daniel-san boss."

"Who told you that? He didn't actually fight him!" Daniel said.

"Point is Daniel-san never take break. Never stop to smell the flowers. Always moving. Always heading where think needed. Right? Daniel-san think Johnny-san unable to keep still, but Johnny-san keep still. Johnny-san like sloth that gross moss. But Daniel-san move so much, flitting from one crisis to another, one goal to next, good, but also leave no time to enjoy moments. Daniel-san forget to breathe. Forget balance. Reach goal and wonder, is this it?"

Daniel sat looking at the garden and sighed. He thought he knew. He thought he knew what the problem was but he couldn't admit it to anyone. He didn't want to say it out loud.

"I think Mr. Miyagi I reached my goal and the problem is… I don't think it's what I want to do."

"No?"

"No. I was happiest I think, at the shop with you and Johnny. But I also don't think that's what I want either. I...I don't know what I want."

"Daniel-san, job does not need to be whole life. Does not need to define. Miyagi fisherman. Whole family fisherman. But Miyagi also karate, also bonsai, also handyman. Miyagi friend, Miyagi husband, Miyagi son, Miyagi father. Daniel-san son, boyfriend, friend, car salesman and mechanic, soccer player, graduate, karate champion. Life not mmm what is the saying? All eggs in one basket. Daniel-san not just cars salesmen. Daniel-san not just fight with Tom Cole. Daniel-san contain multitudes, strong roots growing into a strong tree, with branches spreading out into every which way. Daniel-san not want to be car salesmen that okay. Daniel-san not need to live in box."

"But I already left the bonsai shop Mr. Miyagi. And Johnny and I moved in with his mom so I could follow this dream. He bet on me. I don't want to leave another business I started for nothing."

"Not for nothing!" Mr. Miyagi said. "Businesses do well, do okay, and sometimes they fail. But each failure new lesson. Learn from mistakes. Learn from choices. Daniel-san breathe, close eyes, and breathe."

"Now?"

"Hai."

Daniel groaned and closed his eyes and breathed.

"Daniel-san need time, to take time and reflect. Grow. Need to take break. Even if short one. When make choice to become car salesman Daniel-san different person then Daniel-san now. Not know as much as know now. And even if that's not knowing what want at least know what don't want. So take time and breathe and think and live."

"Yes Mr. Miyagi."

Daniel felt a fear grip his chest and he opened his eyes turning to Mr. Miyagi who'd started to get up.

"What if I'm lost?"

"Sometimes being lost is okay. Have to make choice, go back and retrace steps, pick a new path or continue forward. There is no wrong choice, there is no answer to life, no perfect thing, make choice and can change choice later if need. Close eyes, breathe, reflect and think."

Daniel nodded closing his eyes and breathing.

How long had it been that he'd done this?

Just sat somewhere and breathed and existed?

How long had it been since he'd not been rushing somewhere?

Not balancing multiple spinning plates at once?

Trying to carry all his goals at once?

The closest he got was staying with Laura. But that had been short lived because he felt bad and he found a good apartment in West Hollywood and Johnny was happy to move with him, to be closer to the guys.

He worried he'd wasted his and Johnny’s time. But Mr. Miyagi had said he hadn't wasted his time.

He wondered how tightly he'd been holding on, because his shoulders were stiff.

It wasn't easy to sit there, to root himself and breathe.

His mind didn’t sink into that meditative state as easily as it once had.

He kept worrying.

About Louie at the dealership, about Johnny who was co-sensei-ing with Chozen today.

They were going on a field trip with their younger students somewhere. He couldn't remember where.

It sounded different from his field trips with Mr. Miyagi. No fishing boats or oceans or trying to balance on weird things.

Art museums and ballet. Cultured stuff that felt more like sneaky dates then lessons in karate.

Daniel tried so hard not to get jealous. To not let his mind wander to what he would do if he got to go with Johnny to an art museum or ballet, reaching for his hand, touching him in the dark during the show.

Chozen wasn't him. Still didn't mean he didn't trust him.

But he'd also seen them with their students on field trips. The way the kids hung off of both of them, a small mob in constant need of attention. They were so well behaved in the dojo, well trained when asked to line up, to practice drills. But once that was gone….it'd gotten better. They liked listening to what Johnny and Chozen had to say. They liked their field trips. And the parents liked it. And they always sat on opposite ends of the theater with all the kids between them, and the hands that were holding Johnny's were small and sticky.

Daniel had stopped volunteering to go with them because…Chozen didn't have a chance with a small hoard of children around. And Johnny was too professional. Those old babysitter skills and life guard skills kicking in. Watching and ensuring the kids stayed together, no one got lost, no one got hurt. Daniel understood why Chozen had asked for Johnny's help. Why Johnny thrived with the kids. He'd seen it first hand in New York back in high school the way Johnny was in charge of their group and got them there and back safely.

But he wasn't supposed to be thinking about Johnny. Or Chozen. He was supposed to be thinking about himself. About the feeling that he wasn't…happy.

What did he truly want?

He was reaching his goals and then when he got there he was bored.

He'd gone for cars for what felt like a selfless reason and he'd given back to a community that welcomed him and made him feel safe.

But then he moved out of there, he moved again and again and felt like he'd abandoned everyone even though the dealership was still there.

He loved his home.

He loved hearing Johnny's footsteps through the apartment, knowing it was him because he knew the sounds of his gait, of the way he walked, the soft way he moved. Not like a dancer, but someone who was trained to be quiet. A bad thing, a good thing, but he loved it because it was Johnny.

Knowing he was somewhere in their home.

He was there, they were there together. In the kitchen, in the bedroom getting up, dancing with him in the living room, listening to music laughing and singing together.

It was a soothing balm to how he was feeling. Like seeing Johnny working on their balcony growing flowers and plants and excitedly showing Daniel when they were blooming.

He wanted to have more space, more space for Johnny to grow things. To see what he created. He wanted a bigger kitchen that fit all of their friends. And a spot to grill. He wanted a pool that was just theirs.

He wanted a house. He wanted roots.

The dealership took a lot of hours. There was so much damn paperwork. Meetings and long nights and even though he was giving Louie more work and more responsibility he still wasn't getting home as much, as frequently as he'd hoped.

And maybe that's what he wanted.

He wanted people not work.

He wanted a job with more flexibility, more movement, so he could go home and spend time with Johnny or come to Mr. Miyagi's to have dinner and relax and catch up and not think of all the meetings he had coming up and all the marketing he needed to do and the deals with car manufacturers and the cars that came in for repairs and how could he get the price down for people who needed it.

He still wanted that to exist.

He still wanted to leave LaRusso Auto in West Hollywood.

He still wanted the cars to get repaired with the same love and care that he'd been giving it for years.

He wanted to sell cars to people who weren't getting them elsewhere.

He still wanted that to exist he just....wanted to be there less. He didn't want to be in charge of it any more.

He wanted to quit.

His Ma was going to kill him.

Johnny was going to kill him.

But maybe.

He'd already made Louie go to school. Pushed forward not just by Daniel and family but Chozen had also chipped in on that pressure. Something Daniel was surprisingly grateful for. And showed it every White Day by having Chozen over, though the guys came now too. A big yearly event where Chozen's eyes got watery every year when he traded sweets he owed back and got things in return depending on who beat him to it on Valentine's Day.

And now...now Louie would be...maybe he could train Louie to take over.

Maybe he'd be interested?

Oh god.

Louie?

Louie Jr.?

The same kid who coasted by on Daniel's all-valley wins to get girls and get laid in Parsippany. The same kid who ran away from home to hang around with Johnny and Daniel? The same kid who drank all the wine with him as a kid and got so sick? Who stole family cars to come pick them up and drove terribly from Central Park to Newark?

That Louie Jr.?

Maybe though.

He cared.

He worked well with the staff and when he wasn't being a pain in the ass he was a good salesman.

He cared like Daniel did.

They'd gotten drunk in Daniel's office once after Louie had graduated his undergrad and he'd asked Daniel why.

Why a dealership in West Hollywood, why so damn cheap. Why was that the goal? When he could be making more money.

And Daniel had told him about the Chevrolet Chevelle Malibu wagon. The car that his mom had used to drive them to California and how awful it was and Louie laughed remembering it. And then he told Louie about Johnny's car.

Not the Avanti.

Not the Firebird.

The car Laura had still in the back of her garage, that the two of them had lived in.

Sometimes a car was a home.

Sometimes it was all anyone had as a form of shelter.

And Daniel didn't want anyone to lose that if he could help it.

If he could help people get a leg up, back up on their feet he would.

Louie had stared at him so soberly and quiet all of a sudden that Daniel hadn't known if he'd said something weird.

But the way Louie interacted with customers after was different.

More caring, more gentle, helpful and understanding.

More mature.

Shocking.

But it also helped sooth Daniel.

Maybe that was something. Maybe he could talk Louie into graduate school. Maybe he could get Chozen to help on that. And then maybe Louie could take over. It was LaRusso Auto not Daniel LaRusso Auto.

The thought alleviated so much tension in his shoulders he was shocked.

Louie.

Louie Jr.?!

In charge of LaRusso Auto?

Why was that thought calming?

Was he tired of being responsible?

Was he tired of being in charge?

What did he want?

He'd been wanting to marry Johnny.

He wanted a house.

Those were the next thing he wanted.

He hadn't been sure Johnny had wanted it. Worried that maybe he wasn't that kind of guy. That Sid's marriage to Laura had scared him off from it.

But he remembered how Johnny looked at Jimmy's wedding, in his suit, as best man, Daniel unable to take his eyes off of him. Dancing with him after, but how busy he was and the way he drunkenly cried at the hotel after. Falling apart so quickly, so suddenly.

Daniel had wondered if maybe it was something he had wanted. And then Johnny had confirmed it, telling him all these details Daniel had wanted to know. Ideas of where to go and what to do. And rings. The kind of ring Johnny would like.

He'd tried to be as casual as possible when fishing for information. And Johnny was too drunk to notice that he felt a little guilty. But it also felt like casually trying to ask someone what they wanted for their birthday without outright asking.

And rings…

He knew Johnny had talked about his high school ring, but Daniel had seen it and that was a hard no. They were too bulky.

He wanted to get Johnny a ring he'd liked. That fit him. Which meant knowing what was a no and what he liked.

So he didn't feel too guilty.

But how? How did he move forward?

How did they take that supposedly leap if the bridge was out?

If it didn't exist?

Because Johnny had been adamant about it not being just about the wedding, not just about the party and the food and dance, but being legally by one another's side in the bad times.

It all sucked.

They should've gotten married before Jimmy.

Daniel understood why Johnny had fallen apart.

Breathe.

He was happy for Jimmy. But he was upset at the world.

Breathe.

He didn't need a big project. He needed peace and balance. And that was a big project. Set it aside for a moment.

Focus.

Reflect.

Breathe.

After a while, when his heart had calmed Daniel opened his eyes and sighed.

"Daniel-san want to see photos from Boston?"

"Sure Mr. Miyagi," Daniel said.

He looked at the photo of Mr. Miyagi in his suit standing next to

Louisa. A picture of Julie and Angel. A picture of Julie and the Buddhist monks they'd visited. Mr. Miyagi and the monks. Photos of Julie getting ready for prom.

"Daniel-san have pictures from while Miyagi gone?"

Daniel pulled out his wallet trying to think of what he'd done while Mr. Miyagi had been gone. Other than embarrass himself around Louisa multiple times.

He hadn't expected her to be there when he'd come by for a visit. Johnny teased him about it after.

But they'd checked-in on her from time to time, to make sure she was okay. Johnny showed her around LA, easily taking over the tour guide roll as he always did.

They had gone to the gardens and he'd taken his camera and he'd gotten a good one of Johnny looking at some flowers. And Louisa had taken a couple of the two of them surrounded by flowers. He pulled that out of his wallet to show Mr. Miyagi.

A business card fell out of his wallet and he stooped to pick it up out of the grass. Tommy's aunts business card.

He held it for a moment, flipping it over thoughtfully.

There was no harm in trying things.

Especially when his biggest goal was out of reach.

He could focus on other things.

Maybe he'd give her a call.

Transplanted

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny held the brochure in his hands and worried it.

He'd been given it while picking up flowers for Yukie's birthday.

The workers at the market invited him. Said he might enjoy it.

It was something he'd forgotten about. Something from his old memories from when he was real little, something he'd dreamed of seeing, before everything fell apart.

He was sitting in the shop waiting for Mr. Miyagi to come in.

He wasn't sure what they were going to do this year.

For the last several years Mr. Miyagi had taken time off around New Years. He had taken Sato and Yukie to go look at the Grand Canyon last year and Johnny had kept the shop open.

And New Years was a busy time for Chozen so he couldn't ask Chozen to watch the shop.

And it wasn't like it was a work opportunity.

Johnny was just going to volunteer.

They'd invited him to help and he...wanted to. More than anything else.

But if he wasn't working then the shop might have to close or Mr. Miyagi might not go wherever he had planned to go with Sato and Yukie.

He knew a cruise was on their list. Something Yukie talked about the last time he'd been over.

The wooden chimes sang and Johnny shoved the brochure in the desk drawer. He wished Mr. Miyagi a good morning, jumping up to help with the supplies he'd brought in. Pots he'd picked up from across the street and some baby trees he'd picked up from somewhere.

It took a while to get all the trees potted in the official pots, sitting and working through the soil so it was the right amount of everything the bonsai needed, moving them over to where Mr. Miyagi sat so he could get to work designing.

A quiet but busy morning.

Only interrupted when Chozen came by with coffee, like always, for a quick chat before he opened the dojo.

Then Sato came to take Mr. Miyagi out for lunch, offering to take Johnny as well but Johnny declined. Daniel had packed him lunch. Had made them both lunch and Johnny ate it and dug out the brochure flipping through it again.

Maybe...maybe he could just rush over after work? It was less than an hour away, and he could work in the evenings? Maybe earlier in the mornings?

"Johnny-san get sick if hold inside," Mr. Miyagi said.

"You're back already?" Johnny looked up from his brochure, crumpling it quickly.

"Hai. Eat nearby."

"Mr. Miyagi, I have...I..."

Mr. Miyagi sat down across from Johnny looking at his lunch.

"Daniel-san make?"

"Yeah."

It was quiet.

Mr. Miyagi was waiting.

He could read Johnny unnervingly well. Paid close attention.

He supposed working together just the two of them for so long did it.

"Here," Johnny said pushing the worn brochure across the table to Mr. Miyagi.

"It's...not a job, it's not really anything useful, and it's not really that close. I mean it is, but it's also not, and it doesn't help anything, and I

know you're busy and normally you like to take time off near New Years to go with Sato and Yukie and do things...but I was wondering....I want to help build one."

Mr. Miygi looked at the brochure. "Build one?"

"Before New Years these local colleges all get together and build one. The Polytech colleges? And they said they could use a little extra help when I ran into them at the market."

Mr. Miyagi studied the brochure close. "Miyagi not understand. Build what? Horse?"

"Ah," Johnny said, leaning over the table carefully and pointing.

"Parade float?"

"Yes."

"New Years Parade float?"

"Yes...they're decorated not in paint Mr. Miyagi, all of the color comes from plants."

"These flowers?"

"Yes Mr. Miyagi. Uh so for the weeks leading up to the parade people gather and help the different floats finish their work by adding all the flowers on top."

"Tournament of Roses....not Rose Bowl?"

"Ah, no the football game is later. The parade is in the morning, the football game is in the afternoon. But..."

Mr. Miyagi flipped the brochure over, studying it.

"I used to hear about it a lot, because mom worked at a florist. The big events were this one, Valentines Day, and weddings."

Mr. Miyagi was quiet and Johnny felt his heart pound in his ears.

It'd be okay if Mr. Miyagi said no.

It'd be fine.

He was used to people saying no. Sid always said no or took it back

later. And this wasn't important. It was just something he wanted to do. And it felt like he showing weakness, something that could be exploited. But he tried to banish Kreese and Sid's voices from his head, tried to not get his hopes up too high, tried to temper them, he was trying.

"We should close shop for New Years vacation," Mr. Miyagi said.

"Mr. Miyagi, I don't want you to have to close the shop."

"No no, many shops close for holiday with small staff. We open always. Miyagi go Johnny-san here. Johnny-san go Miyagi here. Neither here, friends here. Time to make new tradition. Johnny-san help make floats, Miyagi go watch parade. Pasadena not far. Sounds pretty. Yukie and Sato will like too."

"I won't be doing much," Johnny said quickly.

Just putting flowers on floats. Both Sid and Kreese would make fun of him for it.

"But Johnny-san want right?"

"Yeah."

"Then we come, see all hard work."

Johnny's vision blurred and he blinked, surprised he was crying. He didn't get it. He didn't understand why tears were running down his cheeks.

Mr. Miyagi patted his hand.

"Miyagi thankful for all of Johnny-san's hard work. For friendship. If find things want to try...try. No harm in trying. If like, then every year. Not like, also okay. Miyagi support Johnny-san no matter what."

Johnny rubbed at his eyes. "Thanks Mr. Miyagi."

"Eat lunch, Daniel-san work very hard. Sandwich in hearts."

Johnny laughed softly, it was watery.

Daniel did like the heart shaped cookie cutters he'd gotten and now everything was heart shaped. It was like a Valentine's Day store had taken over every meal he ate now.

He ate his lunch looking at the brochure telling Mr. Miyagi about the designs he'd heard of.

He couldn't wait.

Daniel hadn't noticed at first, too caught up in talking Louie Jr. into taking his work at LaRusso Auto seriously, and his moonlighting with Tommy's aunt.

He knew Johnny was busy. He always was busy. But it was different and he tried to think of what exactly was different.

It wasn't his hair.

He'd gotten that cut, somewhat recently, it was still longer than when they met but less like he was trying to become a golden Rapunzel.

He hadn't changed the products he used.

But that was part of it.

He smelled different.

It wasn't in the morning, it was at night, when Daniel came home from work and Johnny came home from work and he plopped into Johnny's lap to kiss him.

The smell was different.

Usually he smelled like the earth and soil, of Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees.

A familiar scent. But lately he'd begun to smell like something else.

It wasn't the dojo, because that Daniel would've been able to pinpoint that.

It wasn't food or someone else's house.

Flowers.

Johnny smelled like flowers.

Daniel frowned as he drove towards Mr. Miyagi's. They were supposed to go somewhere together today. Mr. Miyagi had requested it. Requested Daniel come drive him because Sato and Yukie were

apparently off doing something with Chozen. And Daniel should've been going anyway.

Whatever that had meant.

Maybe it did mean something.

Maybe there was something he was supposed to notice and hadn't. Not yet.

Or maybe Johnny had told him something and he'd forgotten?

Too wrapped up with figuring out when he could do photo shoots in between meetings with manufacturers, his sales team, the mechanics, insurance, and towing companies.

Shit.

He'd missed something important.

It wasn't his birthday or Johnny's.

It wasn't their anniversary, either or any of them.

Daniel teased Johnny on the anniversary of when they first met that he was going to celebrate that every year and they'd already gone to the beach over the summer and stayed at the Tommy's lake house.

It wasn't the anniversary of their first date, which they argued about which one counted.

It was New Year and they'd kissed at midnight but then Johnny had said he had an early morning and went to bed.

Daniel had just assumed he had to be at the shop or do something for Chozen. And that was weird. Every year for New Year since they'd moved in with Mr. Miyagi they'd all gone to a temple to ring in the New Year. They dressed up and Daniel had taken cute photos of them the first year, all stiff but happy wearing traditional clothes.

They had one for every year up in the house. But Mr. Miyagi was waiting on him.

For what?

He was waiting outside.

“Ah, Daniel-san, time to go.”

“Go where?” Daniel asked.

Mr. Miyagi blinked, like he was surprised Daniel didn’t know and then smiled softly.

“Pasadena.”

“Pasadena? You know how to get there Mr. Miyagi?”

“Hai,” he said holding up a map.

“I thought you were celebrating today?” Daniel said following Mr. Miyagi’s directions.

“Went to temple at midnight,” Miyagi said.

“But don’t you guys go on a trip?”

“Hai, this year…Pasadena.”

“Why am I crashing your trip?”

“Not crashing. Just thought…maybe Daniel-san not know.”

Yeah he didn’t know.

He didn’t know anything.

He’d been so focused with everything he was doing that he’d missed something.

And he hated it. He hated it so much.

“Johnny-san good worker,” Mr. Miyagi said.

“Yeah.”

“Work very hard.”

“I know.”

“Just going with flow...maybe too much.”

“You think?”

“Miyagi think Johnny need to relax. Have fun.”

“He has fun. We just got back from the lodge with the guys and his snowboarding was amazing.”

“Good trip?”

“Yeah. Jimmy talked our ear off about his wife and kids. Even though we just saw them.”

“Proud father.”

“Yeah he is. You ever think Mr. Miyagi that…maybe Johnny…maybe I…aren’t where we need to be?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you know I don’t like my job any more.”

“Hai.”

“But does Johnny?”

“Miyagi doesn’t know. Can’t tell.”

“I know he wants to get married…but that’s not possible. I’m sure he wants a house. But we’ve been together for so long…shouldn’t we be…further despite everything?”

“Daniel-san want house? Buy house.”

“I also want to ask him to marry me… but I can’t.”

“Start with house. Start looking. Daniel-san need small goals. Like when upset about work decide to start training Louie. Start photography again. Start by taking step. But don’t take on too much. Still trying to figure out balance.”

Daniel laughed softly. “I’m always trying to figure out balance Mr. Miyagi. I feel like I’m always a toy top, spinning around until I get dizzy and fall over, only keeping perfect balance for an hour tops.”

“Daniel-san should call Kumiko-san.”

“Yeah, I probably should. It’s been a while since I’ve caught up with her. I think I had a meeting last time she called and Johnny told me she was on tour.”

“Not to catch up. But to talk balance. Kumiko-san dancer. Dancer

spins and spins and spins and learns how to fall safely."

Daniel nodded, turning off onto the exit for Pasadena.

"That's a good idea Mr. Miyagi."

"Daniel-san have time. Friend moving forward with love and family and home and career does not mean Daniel-san behind. Daniel-san focus on Daniel-san. Cheer on friend but not compare."

"Easier said then done. Hey this it? Damn why's there so many people here? It's packed."

"Hai. Parade. Spot to park there," Mr. Miyagi said pointing.

Daniel parked and hopped out.

"So what now?" Daniel said following the shorter man through the crowd.

"Find where Chozen, Yukie and Sato-san have saved us spot. Good spot to watch."

Daniel nodded following along, until they found the three and he took a seat next to Chozen.

He wanted to ask.

What were they doing there?

What was going on?

Why was there another chair next to him?

Who were they waiting on.

What was Johnny up to?

Where was he?

Was he stuck at the shop by himself?

The parade started and colorful floats moved down the street, with moving parts. Dragons whose claws moved and mouths opened, a pirate ship above a bright blue waves. Someone sunk down into the seat next to him with an exhausted sigh and a smell of flowers.

Johnny.

He had pieces of flowers stuck to him and Daniel reached out and took his hand.

“Which one Johnny-san help with?” Sato asked.

“The next one,” Johnny said.

Massive colorful koi fish were jumping from the float.

“You helped with it?” Daniel asked softly.

“With the flowers. All of the color on the floats come from flowers and fruit and plants. No paint. Hundreds and hundred of tiny little flowers. It took a long time and a lot of people,” Johnny said rubbing his thumb along the back of Daniel’s hand.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, they do this every year and I forgot about it until I was at the market and they asked if I wanted to help.”

“The market?”

“Flower market. I used to go all the time as a kid and have been going somewhat frequently to help a couple vendors move the flowers around. It’s where I get the bouquet that changes out in the vase on the dining room table.”

“I…can’t believe I didn’t notice.”

“Well I didn’t really say anything. I wasn’t sure if I’d like doing this or if it’d go well. It took me like three weeks of worrying over the pamphlet to get up the courage to ask Mr. Miyagi if I could take time off to come do this.”

“Johnny you can take time off!” Daniel said turning to him, holding his hand tight.

“I know. I just…New Years is kind of important to them, so it’d mean we’d have to shut down the shop. And we did today.”

“You gotta rest, you can’t overdo it.”

“Says you. Master of overdoing it.”

Daniel sighed.

Johnny was wearing a t-shirt that said volunteer on it.

He wondered how many of those he had. For how many random little places. But he seemed happy, watching the floats go by.

“Did you have fun?”

“Loads of fun,” Johnny said smiling. “I got to paint with flowers. I’ve wanted to since the florists told me about it as a kid. We were all supposed to come and work on it…before they passed. I think… I want to do this every year.”

“You should. It’s beautiful,” Daniel said lifting his hand and kissing the back of Johnny’s.

He liked the idea of it. A new New Years tradition. New Years Eve with Sato, Chozen, Yukie and Mr. Miyagi dressing up and going to the temples. Kissing Johnny at midnight. Then coming down to watch whatever Johnny had helped design march past on New Year’s Day. Maybe they’d have brunch after and Johnny could talk about it in more detail. What flowers he got to use, which ones were fun to work with, which ones were a pain. Daniel wanted to know which ones were the ones stuck to him that he hadn’t noticed.

He looked so pleased, so happy, covered in flowers and so damn beautiful that Daniel had a hard time looking away to enjoy the parade.

They stood on the steps of a house they'd visited a couple months ago. It felt like ages ago. Some random person Daniel wanted to introduce Johnny to.

He remembered walking around the place, being given a tour by the owners.

It was nice. A nice house.

"So what are we doing here again?" Johnny asked turning towards Daniel.

Daniel moved fast. Johnny wasn't expecting it. He knocked Johnny's

legs out from under him.

Sweep the legs.

Why?

Why had he ever taught Daniel that?

It only ever got used against him.

Johnny prepared himself for a fall, even though he knew he shouldn't worry about it, but some habits died hard.

Instead he found himself in Daniel's arms.

"What are you doing? I thought we agreed no karate just out in places? What if I'd grabbed you and sent us both falling? We would've cracked our heads open on that cement there, on the steps. Maybe broken something. Wait a second, Daniel-"

"Don't you dare mention the knee," Daniel said, tone deadly serious but there was joy in his eyes.

"Put me down."

"No."

"I'm too heavy."

"I've been working out, specifically for this. I'm not going to put you down, but you want to know how you can help?"

"How?"

"Hold on to me, you're squirmier than the weights at the gym. I refuse to drop you. Which means if you keep squirming we're both going down."

Johnny sighed wrapping his arms around Daniel's neck and holding still.

"That's because I'm alive."

"Yeah, you're also hotter than the weights. Want to keep talking about this or can I get this ball rolling?"

"What ball? Why are you carrying me? Listen this is someone's home,

you can't just carry people into other people's homes."

"There's no one in there," Daniel said pushing the door open.

"Is this something weird from the jar? We agreed to discuss stuff from the jar after the last incident."

Daniel laughed.

"This isn't from the jar. Not really. Not on the list of things to get all riled up about. I love you and I'm so damn excited, but I love that you don't have a clue what's happening. I love that this is a surprise. I love that you're sometimes so dense which makes stuff like this fun. Now please watch your limbs and your pretty head so I don't accidentally bump you into the doorway."

Johnny wondered how long he'd been working on this. He knew from when he'd been trying to see if he could do push ups with someone on his back that it'd taken months. But he'd already had a base to start with.

He studied Daniel's face. He didn't look like he was struggling. He wasn't tense. He wasn't even trying to hide tension.

He was excited, plain and simple.

He was smiling.

Johnny wanted to kiss him. But this...this was dangerous. If Daniel could pick him up now...Daniel wasn't going to stop. He was in for new things.

How hadn't he noticed?

He grabbed Daniel's arms frequently. Saw him all the time.

Sneaky bastard.

He'd known Daniel was working out. Some health kick since Dutch was in town.

He'd just chalked it up to old days, and that they liked hanging out while working out. Not that Daniel had a plan to knock Johnny off his feet.

Literally.

Dutch and Daniel together was dangerous because Dutch had a similar habit of trying to knock Johnny down, wanting to spar. He felt like one of those old tired lions surrounded by a bunch of baby lion cubs that just wanted to rough house all day.

When did he get old?

It was weird being carried.

Daniel seemed sturdy enough.

Not having any issue.

Bobby usually was the best at getting him off his feet, but it was always just a quick lift in a hug.

Not like this.

Not carried like a damn princess.

That's exactly what the kids he used to babysit would tell him if they saw him. That's what they always wanted to do. Play princess and have tea parties and to be carried around or for him to do magic tricks or flips.

Daniel looked at him smiling.

"When was the last time you were held like this?"

"What do you mean?" Johnny asked.

Daniel had to be lying, there had to be someone in this house, or maybe they were house sitting?

"I'll make sure to do this more," Daniel said stepping into the house. "So, Johnny what do you think?"

"You've done a lot of work. Sneaky."

Daniel grinned. "Thank you, but I mean the house, what do you think of it?"

"I told you last time we were here that I like it."

"Yeah? Good."

The sound quality was off.

Johnny looked around.

It was empty.

All the furniture was gone.

"They repainting?"

"I figured we would," Daniel said

"We? Oh, did you offer us to help them paint? Miss Miyagi style teachings?"

"No. Johnny look at me."

Johnny looked at him, their faces were so close.

Daniel's brown eyes were serious.

"Welcome home Johnny."

Johnny stared at him. Stared at him for a long time. Looked at the arms around him, the door they'd walked through. The empty echo-y house.

"What?" Johnny whispered.

"You know all those dinners we've had at people's homes we don't know?"

"Yeah. So you admit you didn't know them huh? I thought so."

Daniel smiled but continued, "And how we did a tour after? And I asked you what you thought about the place?"

"Yeah."

"Those were all houses for sale. I wanted to surprise you," Daniel said.

"That seems like a lot of work," Johnny said tilting his head back and looking at the ceiling.

"Says the man who spent all his money on me, who got me 19 bouquets for my 19th birthday, who created the most intricate plan to get rid of Cobra Kai. The guy who made a homemade piñata for his godkids like what, second birthday? The guy who when he saw a kid crying on a plane started doing magic tricks. A full on show and the

whole damn section applauded when you were done. This is nothing. I'm just getting started."

Johnny slowly lowered his gaze looking at Daniel. He'd gotten goosebumps.

"This is...ours?" Johnny asked.

"Yes," Daniel said.

"I think you can set me down now."

"No, I think I'm supposed to keep carrying you around."

"Are you sure? I'm pretty sure people put a person down after the doorway."

"No, I think it's on the bed."

"I don't think that's right. Is there even a bed here?" Johnny asked, feeling his ears burn.

"There's not one yet, which is why I'm just going to have to keep carrying you around," Daniel said, his grip tightening, shifting Johnny in his arms like he was preparing to fight to hold on to Johnny, like Johnny was a cat that wasn't going to let himself be held for longer than five minutes.

But Johnny just stared at the blank walls and the windows trying to digest what he'd been told.

Daniel started walking through the dining room and towards the kitchen.

Now everything made sense.

Why Daniel had asked him what he thought about the tile, holding a glass of wine in his hand as they talked quietly about someone elses' home.

Johnny had assumed he was thinking of their future home.

Not that this would be their home.

He remembered how he'd thought it was a game. Talk honestly about homes, about how he'd redo things, what he'd prefer.

He had had fun with it because Daniel had been judging everything so harshly. Gossiping in what felt like those two old Muppets that were in the balcony and dissed everything.

Mischief.

That's what it felt like.

Every house they visited. For months. And then in the car on the way home Daniel would kiss him before they'd even left.

It was always so intense. Sometimes it led to the seat going back and Johnny recommending they go someplace much more secluded, and Daniel would get the hint, but would still touch him on the ride to wherever he thought was secluded enough. Enough until Johnny couldn't wait, until he was a asking Daniel to hurry up.

It was embarrassing.

But now...now it made sense.

Johnny had thought they were visiting people Daniel needed to get to know for work.

Work dinners. He was used to it. It was old hat, even if he was a little rusty. He'd done it most of his life for Sid.

But really Daniel was imagining them living there. Was trying to see how Johnny looked in the light. He was day dreaming and getting overwhelmed and started to overflow but he didn't say anything because he wanted it to be a surprise. And the best way he handled that was by a ridiculous amount of car sex.

Johnny had just thought he'd gotten a thing for the car. That fancy car he'd gotten himself when he retired the Ford. Some proof that the seats were better. But this explained it.

"Well now I know why you got so damn horny after every house party we've been to for the last like year."

Daniel laughed.

"Do you know how hard it was not to say anything? How many times I caught myself from asking you if you thought you'd like to wake up in this room or that room? If you thought this countertop was at the right height for cooking or sex. If you thought there was enough room

in the bathtub for the both of us."

Johnny kissed him.

"Careful or I'll set you on this counter and try and find out if it's the right height. I know you want to see the other rooms."

"I do, but I also kind of wish there was a bed here," Johnny said.

"We will for sure break in the house."

"I don't think that's what people usually have in mind for that."

"Right. So I'll hurry the grand tour. Kitchen."

"Love it."

"Dining room number two."

"Number two?"

"Well that entry room can also be a dining room."

"I see."

"And this is bathroom one, for guests."

"No bath huh?" Johnny said filling his voice with teasing disappointment.

Daniel looked at him, surprised but then his features relaxed, when he saw Johnny's smile.

"Aren't you tired yet?" Johnny asked, playing with the ends of Daniel's hair at the nape of his neck.

"Never."

"Don't be stubborn."

"I gotta show you the best parts, we're going up a floor."

"You're not carrying me up the stairs."

"I'm carrying you through every room of this house and up the stairs and then outside."

Johnny sighed. "I know there's more to down here, but if you

insist...then I'll do my best to give you a massage later when all your muscles cramp up."

"They won't cramp up."

"You worked so hard."

"Yes, and I'm expecting a good reward."

"For what?"

"Everything."

Johnny laughed kissing his cheek. "Fine fine, show me what you want to show me."

"Everything," Daniel said. "That's the living room, now up we go."

"So what's up here?"

"Bedrooms. An office. A bathroom."

"Two bathrooms. How luxurious," Johnny said, in faux wonder.

"Ah, no, there's three."

"Three?" Johnny asked feigning ignorance.

He'd wondered why Daniel kept going into peoples bedrooms and poking around their bathrooms.

He'd thought Daniel had been interested in something else, a little naughtier. Now he felt embarrassed that that's where his own mind had went.

"Yes, there's one in our room."

"You hanging in there?"

"Yes, ask me again and I'll pinch you," Daniel threatened. "First room, guest bedroom," Daniel said pausing for a brief second outside the door. "Figure we'll make it nice and we'll stick a good size bed in and the guys can sleep there."

"Not in our bed?" Johnny asked.

Daniel looked at him. "I want there to be space to kick them out of our

bed if we want it just us, without them sleeping on the floor or couch. Dutch keeps talking like he's princess and the pea about how much our couch sucks. And that's why I keep waking up to find him in our bed. I told him it was a fold out and he said why bother with that when there's room next to us?"

"They'll appreciate that you thought of them...and might make fun of you."

"Let them. If I have you under me I don't want them in our room. I went through enough of their cockblocking that I'm going to make that room so damn cozy they won't sneak into our bed like naughty children. Anyway, here's the guest bathroom. This one has a bath."

"Nice."

"Then we've got a linen closet. And an office. And voilà, our bedroom."

"What color do you want to paint it?"

"Blue."

"Blue?" Johnny asked.

"A nice sky blue," Daniel said walking past the windows and the closet and the bathroom door. "And there's our bathtub big enough for both of us. Finally."

"The true reason you bought the house," Johnny said.

"Yup, so I can fuck you in that tub as often as I want."

"If I didn't know better I'd think you were serious."

Daniel laughed. "Good thing you know me better. Because you know I want to do it everywhere."

Johnny pressed his face against Daniel's shoulder and neck. As Daniel turned and left the bathroom and their room and headed down the stairs. He looked up again as Daniel stopped, at the sliding door with a frown.

Johnny reached out and pushed it open.

"Thank you."

"Your hands are full."

"They are," Daniel said with a grin stepping outside.

There was a pool and an entertaining space, beyond it was a garden, a bit overgrown, a bit neglected.

There was a bench, the only furniture left from the previous owners and Daniel sat down under one of the big trees.

"So? Do you like it?" Daniel asked softly, wrapping his arms around Johnny's waist, brown eyes searching Johnny's face.

Johnny cupped the sides of Daniel's face kissing him. "I love it."

"Yeah? I want you to be brutally honest okay? On everything. Like you were when we were looking secretly at houses."

"Was I brutally honest?"

"One of the houses we saw you said ‘why do they have so many spiral staircases? Did they really struggle that much with horses? Because that's why we have spiral staircases, so horses wouldn't come in and steal food. I feel like I'm in a Maurits Cornelis Escher painting’."

"Well who needs three spiral stair cases? Can you imagine trying to go up and down all those drunk?"

"Well we tried," Daniel laughed. "I had to go to the library and look up that painter."

"You don't remember him from art class?"

"Not all of us paid attention in art class and spend like half their week hanging out with an artistic sensei."

"You should come with us some time."

"To what?"

"We take the kids to museums. The Getty is nice."

"I know the Getty is nice," Daniel said. "But it's weird being like a third chaperone. I don't like following Chozen's orders. I want to undermine him and I shouldn't do that. It's like a knee jerk reaction. And the only way to distract myself is to flirt with you. I can't do that in front of kids."

"You show such restraint. You deserve a reward," Johnny said pressing

soft kisses along Daniel's jaw.

"I do don't I? But I want to know what you think? I thought.... you liked this one, which is why I bought it. You said 'I could see us living somewhere like this'. And that's...that's why I bought it. For you. For us. Because I agreed. I know you've been wanting to put down roots. That you've spent so long standing in poisonous or barren dirt that you haven't really grown. That you...you're like a bonsai."

Johnny blinked staring at Daniel in surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"Listen, I love bonsai. They're so cool. I know you love bonsai. But some trees aren't meant to be kept in small spaces. They're not meant to be forced to be trimmed and tiny and perfect. They should be let to grown and flourish and to just be. And you...You're like a tree that got put in a bonsai pot but you're meant to be like this one," Daniel said pointing to the tree behind him.

"You're meant to grow somewhere nice and to get as tall as you want and not have to keep making yourself small. I mean you've been working on it, taking up more space. But I want to give you that space. Gently replanting you somewhere where you can flourish. This house isn't mine. It's ours. I want you to help me decide what we want to redo, what we want to keep. What color do you want our bedroom to be? I know I said blue. I do like blue. But I want to go to the hardware store and get all those little paint cards and stick them around the house. Or do you want wallpaper? Do we like the light fixtures? Do we like the door knobs and the little handles on all the cabinets and drawers? What about the mailbox?"

"Can we walk through the house together for that?"

Daniel sighed. "Yes, fine. But I still want to carry you through that door as much as possible."

Johnny laughed squeezing one of Daniel's forearms. "So strong. How'd you know you'd be able to handle walking through the whole house?"

Daniel grinned at him kissing his nose. "I practiced."

"Yeah?"

"I picked up the guys and lugged them around."

"All of them?"

"Yes, started with Jimmy, then Tommy, then Bobby, and last I gave Dutch a tour," Daniel said with a grin. "They were a bit bossy about it."

"I could see that. Nothing stops you, huh?" Johnny asked laughing.

"Nothing."

Johnny looked at the garden.

He wondered what plants would look nice.

Which ones were responsible.

Which ones would smell nice and flower beautifully.

He wondered if they should grow their own vegetables or something. If there was enough space, an herb garden might be nice. He could grow basil that Daniel could use in his cooking.

"I love it," Johnny said.

"Really?"

Daniel looked so happy, so relieved, so excited.

Johnny felt tears prick his eyes.

Theirs.

A home for the two of them. Not an apartment, not living with Mr. Miyagi, the guys or their moms.

Their own space and enough of it to grow, whatever that meant for them. To have their friends over. To have their loved ones over. To host events without Daniel grumbling in his ear about privacy and all the things he wanted to do.

He'd never had something like that but it was something he'd always wanted.

Curled up with an old blanket in the back of his mom's car, dreaming of what a house would be like. A space of his own. That he could do whatever he wanted with. Without landlords who could kick him out and upend his life.

He'd dreamed, for a bit, of being good at something, enough so that he could make enough money to buy a house for himself, a home for his mother. And then eventually after living with Sid anywhere but there was good enough.

"You win," Johnny said brushing away tears.

"Win?"

"I can't ever beat this for grand gestures," Johnny said.

He wondered how Daniel felt, yearning for his own place as well, especially after that period after Okinawa when his mother had just left without a clear word of warning.

"It's selfish though," Daniel said pressing his forehead to Johnny's. "I wanted a home too. One with you."

"You want to be a tree too?"

Daniel laughed. "Yeah, I want to no longer be a bonsai with you. I want us to grow old and tall together."

Johnny smiled kissing him. "Me too."

They ended up borrowing Mr. Miyagi's truck and taking it to the hardware store. They'd been there what felt like hundreds of times, needing paint for various projects or picking up things for Mr. Miyagi or the shop or helping with their mom's places.

But now that it was for them it seemed overwhelming. There were too many colors of paint. Just the blue section alone was intense.

"Well," Daniel said clapping his hands together and rubbing them. "What colors should we get? A little bit of everything?"

"Well we know we want to paint the bedroom, and that's a good a spot as any to start," Johnny said wrapping an arm around Daniel's shoulders and leaning against him. "We should definitely paint the ceiling too. What color do you want the ceiling to be?"

"The ceiling?"

"Sometimes I forget that you just painted Mr. Miyagi's fence," Johnny said. "And that you didn't go through months and months of secret

training that involved repainting apartments after people moved out."

"That's because I got Miyagi-do emergency life or death training. You got slow zen Miyagi-do healing," Daniel said looking at him.

"There's a difference?"

"Yeah," Daniel said, hooking his arm around to rest on Johnny's shoulder. "You got all the DIY skills. But I for sure can paint a fence."

"Are you saying you expect me to paint the entire house on my own?"

"No way, I'm just going to follow your lead on this one. Until we get to the fence. Or if anything needs sanded. I'm a pro at that. What color is good for a ceiling?"

"Well I already spackled, sanded, removed all the outlet covers and taped up everything, so we got to pick out a ceiling primer and a wall primer and then we need to pick out the actual paint. White for now? Maybe egg shell? There's a whole bunch of white. Off white? We'll need a nap roller for the ceiling. We could borrow one from Mr. Miyagi, same with drop cloth but I feel kind of bad borrowing his stuff...and for a house, we should probably have our own."

Daniel was staring at him.

"What?"

"Mr. Miyagi really did teach you huh? Also why did you already do all that work by yourself? I thought we were doing it together? Let me sand stuff."

"You've had some long nights at the dealership and I know you've been itching to get started. Putting tape up and filling holes takes time and you have to let it set and wait and I thought this way we could jump straight into painting together."

"Johnny, please tell me you haven't done the whole house already. We're trying to do teamwork."

"I know. I just did the bedroom. I thought we'd start there, get it all set up, move into that room and then slowly work our way through the rest of the house together. I mean it's not like we're not still going to have to wait. We'll have to wait for the primer to dry and stuff like that. Plus it'll give us time to decide if we like the outlet covers or want new ones, or if we want to repaint the cabinets before we get the

knobs and stuff. Though we could just do all of it at once."

Daniel leaned his head against him and sighed.

"This is a bigger project then I expected."

"It'll take time. I mean we could ask the guys to come help, or we could use it as a lesson for the students, if you want."

"No," Daniel said. "I want to do it ourselves...I just underestimated how long it would take and how busy I am. I want to move in now, but I want to do this right. I want to do all the painting and DIY stuff we can ourselves before we move in and then never get around to doing it. Or you sneakily do it yourself, by yourself."

"I won't if you don't want me to," Johnny said.

"No, I also want you to do what you want to do. How about this, give me a couple weeks and I'll see if I can move some stuff around and help more. And let's look at light fixtures and stuff just to see what they have and grab all the blue and white chips."

"That's a lot of paint chips," Johnny said with a laugh.

"We've got other rooms, we might like a different shade of blue elsewhere."

"Do you want a backsplash in the kitchen?" Johnny asked grabbing a collection of white chips.

"I thought I knew what I needed to know, but you, you know so much more than I do. Please, I beg of you, one room at a time. Teach me about backsplashes when we finally make it to the kitchen," Daniel said grabbing some blue ones.

"How about we go to one of those show rooms and look around and get ideas and I can show you what stuff is," Johnny said.

"That'd be nice. We also, between the two of us and everything that's in storage, we definitely do not have enough furniture, so it'd be nice to look at some. You just lead me around and I'll follow you," Daniel said, grabbing the last of the blue chips.

"Is that just an excuse to stare at my ass?" Johnny asked quietly.

Daniel grinned, giving him a quick peck on the cheek. "Maybe," he said. "Though I never need an excuse."

Daniel was standing in their bedroom on the drop cloth staring at the blue wall with intense focus, trying to discern while it was still wet if he truly liked it.

Johnny had finished his wall and crept towards Daniel with his paint brush. He wasn't paying attention. His guard was down and Johnny was going to act. He drew a stripe on Daniel's cheek.

"Hey!" Daniel said, pushing away, hand raising to his cheek.

Johnny laughed, darting away. They'd decided they wanted to paint more than one room at once. So there was drop cloth everywhere. They'd finished the halls, which were just a basic off white, and were working on the primer in the other rooms of the house.

Still debating on colors.

As expected Daniel was following after.

Johnny braced himself as he reached the living room, turning towards Daniel.

A big open space was much better if he was going to get his comeuppance. And it wouldn't destroy any of the work they'd already done.

Daniel grabbed the brush Johnny held.

"Think you're so sneaky huh?"

"I think you needed a break from staring at the wall and literally watching paint dry," Johnny said, jumping up to avoid Daniel trying to sweep his legs. "Come on now, how often do you think I'll fall for that?"

"You've fallen for that plenty, probably shouldn't have taught it to me."

"You wanted to learn it! I wasn't expecting it to become like the thing you used against me the most."

"You can't just expect to paint my face and escape unscathed, so just hold still will you?"

"You expect me to just hold still? I'm not an idiot," Johnny said

dodging out of the way.

"Well you gave up your weapon pretty easily," Daniel said holding up the paint brush and lunging forward.

Johnny moved his head out of the way but felt the cool wet brush of bristles against his neck.

"Well now we're even," Johnny said.

"Oh, we are definitely not even," Daniel said grabbing Johnny shirt. "You said I needed a distraction, I think I've come up with a great distraction thanks to you."

They tussled, Johnny ended up with the paint brush again, getting the tip of Daniel's nose before Daniel snatched it back, getting Johnny's back.

Johnny was glad they went for the cloth drop cloths rather than the plastic as he managed to get Daniel's stomach when he wrested the brush back, pinning Daniel below him, hair a mess, paint in it, random splotches on his face and arms, his torso.

Johnny had managed for the most part to avoid getting hit. Except his neck and back. But Daniel flipped them.

"Was that fast enough for you?" Daniel asked.

Johnny tried pushing himself up but Daniel put a warm hand on his chest and pushed down. "I shall get my revenge, and I will enjoy it."

Daniel hiked up Johnny’s shirt and brushed paint over Johnny's chest.

"The thing I'm learning," Daniel said. "Is that paint requires a couple coats and you have to be specific with the amount of pressure you apply."

He went back over and Johnny shivered at the delicate touch of wet bristles.

"And there's different ways to do it. Like you could do up and down, side to side or v's and w's, that initial coat doesn't seem to matter," Daniel said swirling a tightening spiral on his right pec. "All that does matter is that there's an even coat. And when there's not, it can just be wiped away."

He held the handle of the brush between his teeth and rubbed his

thumbs over Johnny's nipples, smudging away at the blue paint several times until pink showed through.

Johnny felt his skin burn and pulse race, squirming underneath Daniel.

"See, wasn't even enough, let me try that again," Daniel said taking the brush from his teeth. "Gotta get the entire thing even, so don't move, or else I'll have to just keep doing it. Though I don't mind, I could do this all day, slow as you like. Though maybe you want to get ready for other things?" Daniel asked moving the paint brush into his other hand and digging into one of his pockets and pulling a smaller container of lube and a condom.

"I shouldn't be surprised," Johnny said reaching for the bottle.

Daniel held up his hands that had paint on them. "Sorry, if you want me to hurry on that front I'm going to need some help. Though I can help a little," Daniel said stick the brush behind his ear, hooking his fingers on Johnny's waistband and pulling until Johnny's legs were free.

Daniel grinned pleased with himself. "I'm getting better at that."

"A little too good," Johnny said, face flushed.

He reached for the condom, but Daniel set it aside pressing the lube back into Johnny hands. "I'll paint, you prep."

Johnny stared at him and then at the bottle in his hand. Daniel moved leaning down to kiss him, rubbing at his nipples, clearing away the rest of the paint.

"If you want I'll give you a little time alone to get started while I go get more paint."

"We're wasting paint on this?" Johnny asked.

"Well I got a new idea I want to test out," Daniel said with a grin. "And I know you get a little shy sometimes. So I'll be right back."

"I don't get shy," Johnny said but Daniel was gone.

He covered his eyes with his forearm and breathing carefully as he listened to Daniel walk back up the stairs towards their room. Had he ever done that while Daniel had been in the room?

On the phone yes, but in the room no.

Usually if they were together Daniel did it.

He opened the bottle, he wondered how many of those already were hidden about the house. Was that what Daniel did? Came over and just made sure there were lubes and condoms everywhere within reach? Never wanting a repeat of Johnny's birthday when they ran out.

Or did he always just carry some in his pockets? Or both? Did he keep some in the inside of his jacket at work?

How did he explain that? Like had it ever fallen out when he'd hung up his jacket and rolled up his dress sleeves to work on a car? Because Johnny had seen him do that a couple times at Mr. Miyagi's.

Jacket folded carefully and set aside, the sure ways he flicked his hands around the sleeves to get the fabric up past his elbows so that it wouldn't get dirty, before leaning over the car to look in and see what was the matter or to run a simple check for Mr. Miyagi.

The view was always amazing. And maybe he spent too long standing in Mr. Miyagi's kitchen drinking iced green tea watching Daniel work. He knew he spent too long stuck in one spot, appreciating, as the ice in his glass melted.

Now he supposed, in his future he might get that view more often, in their own garage or out in the drive. Their secluded drive.

When Johnny had found their first apartment his key focus had been security and safety.

When Daniel had been picking out houses for them to check out, all of them were secluded.

Johnny was pretty sure as he moved his slick fingers that he knew why. After all he could look out the glass sliding doors and see no one. No one could see him.

"Damn," Daniel said voice breathless, surprised.

Johnny looked at him, met his warm brown eyes as Daniel walked towards him, kneeling down gently between Johnny's spread legs. His shirt brushing against Johnny enough for him to reach for himself, for some friction, but Daniel caught his hand and laced their fingers,

setting the tray of paint and brush to the side and kissing him slow and languid.

Johnny tried to arch his hips up towards Daniel but he was just out of reach for any good to come of it. He made a frustrated sound into the warm kiss.

"This better not be like that one White Day again," Johnny murmured when Daniel pulled away.

"No, oh, no," Daniel said dipping the brush in paint, brushing it across Johnny's chest again, humming and looking pleased with himself when Johnny moaned and twitched. "Mind helping me with one more project?" Daniel asked looking around.

"What?"

"Where'd the condom go?"

"Probably got under part of the fold of the drop cloth," Johnny said turning his head to the side.

It was like a messy sea, it could be anywhere and he had no patience to look. He turned his gaze back up to Daniel.

"I guess I could just...pull out?" Daniel said thoughtfully with a frown.

"We're going to have to take a shower after this anyway," Johnny said.

Daniel met his gaze, eyes widened a little in surprise. He leaned down. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, just hurry up and tell me why you went to get the paint and fuck me already."

Daniel studied him for a moment, thrown, and Johnny felt his ears burn from the intense way Daniel was looking at him.

"Right," he said, quickly taking off the rest of his clothes. He set his hands, palm down into he paint. "One of the reasons I had you start, and do what you're doing is because paint probably shouldn't go there."

"I figured," Johnny huffed.

It really wasn't a good angle for him to get as much enjoyment out of

what he was doing and Daniel was so damn close that if Daniel didn't hurry up he was going to knock him over and do it himself.

"And I'm not going to touch mine because that's probably not a good place to get paint either."

Johnny heaved a tired world weary sigh. "Daniel."

"But I do want to see where all I touch you, while I make love to you," Daniel said. "This blue will do a good job of that I think."

He carefully grabbed a handful of Johnny's thigh. It was just going to make a mess, it was just going to smear.

Daniel's brow furrowed as he focused, trying to line up without using his hands. Johnny pushed himself up, checking his free hand for paint, there was just a bit on the back of his hand from Daniel's thumb. So he carefully reached out, taking a hold of Daniel’s dick and carefully guiding him in.

"Thanks," Daniel said voice heavy, gently grabbing Johnny's hips, pulling him close until he was all the way in. Deeper than Johnny's fingers could reach.

Johnny grabbed the drop cloth in his fists, letting out a heady moan that echoed through the empty house.

Daniel leaned down kissing his exposed throat and jaw.

Not just an empty house. Their empty house.

How long had Johnny been trying to save up for his own place?

His escape money when he'd been younger, before he'd spent it on Daniel? He hadn't spent money on much. Just the Avanti, and his jacket because after moving in with Sid escape was the main thing he thought of the most.

How could he get out?

But now, these walls that echoed with the sounds they were making were their own walls. Not walls they were renting, or walls they were guests in.

Theirs.

Space without nosy neighbors who might overhear.

And Daniel wanted to take it slow, do it all right. Which meant drop cloths and painters tape, screwing and unscrewing light switch covers, long moments contemplating wet blue paint, wondering if it'd stay that color after it dried, if they'd like it in all types of sunlight.

It meant eventually taking a long hard look at the tile in the bathroom and trying to decide if it was what they liked or if it should be changed, finally showing Daniel what a backsplash was and the types available, seeing if they liked their countertops and what sort of furniture they wanted.

It meant deciding who they were and expressing it everywhere. Little bits of themselves in every nook and cranny. It meant going to the garden shop and picking out shrubs and flowers, and house plants. It meant landscaping and designing, deciding what all they could feasibly do themselves and what required help. What needed an experts touch.

Daniel slid out and Johnny prepared a litany of complaints until he was guided over, onto his hands and knees and re-filled, a smoother transition then he expected. Complaints squashed.

There were so many little things they'd need. They'd have to clean the gutters, wash the windows. Did they want to paint the front door? Did they like that door? Was it them? The entrance to their home?

It was deeper somehow, more than it had been and Johnny gripped the drop cloth tightly in his hands. At least the mess was contained. Nothing would get on their hardwood floors.

Not yet. But they'd have to get cleaning supplies. For everything.

Johnny felt Daniel's lips on his back.

Johnny had tried to think if he'd have picked any of the other houses they'd looked at. And the answer was no. They were too grand or too small.

He felt like Goldilocks and had nearly mentioned it to Daniel. That this house was just right, right for them, but he hadn't. He'd thrown his energy into everything there was to do because he got too overwhelmed when he took in the gravity of it all.

Daniel had bought a house, not for just himself, but for both of them.

"What do you think about a mirrored glass floor?" Daniel asked

warmly in his ear.

"Huh?"

"I don't mind this position, but I'd rather be able to see you, you know? And if the floor was mirrored, then I'd see everything. You'd see everything. How you look when I'm inside of you like this."

Daniel kissed his burning ear, tongue running along the edge of his ear.

Johnny didn't think he could handle it, seeing himself like that.

He doubted he'd see himself the way Daniel saw him. He wasn't sure he ever would.

"Mirrored floors...nnn...would be a pain to clean."

Daniel laughed softly, breath tickling the back of his neck. "And the girls would probably hate me for it."

Johnny laughed.

He could see that.

Daniel getting into trouble for putting in mirrored floors, a misunderstanding of why, and having to explain. One of his terrible ideas coming back to bite him.

The thought made him giddy, so utterly ridiculous. But at least they were learning. Daniel was starting to see his bad horny fueled ideas and second guess them, to realize logic and reason and how poorly thought out they were some times.

It'd just taken....how many years?

Though Johnny had had bad ones too. Sex in the lake by the lake house hadn't been a good idea. It'd been hard to keep a hold of Daniel and to be careful of the water. The ground was too slippery. And they'd ended up doing it on the shore, half in the water with Daniel's legs around Johnny's waist and when it was over…Daniel had been stuck. The mud wouldn't let him go and he'd laughed so much while Johnny tried to dig him out. Laughing about the shower, about how this time he would never live this one down.

Or in the woods either time. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten until the second time Daniel had ended up covered in bug bites and Johnny

had covered him in cream.

"Maybe I'll get a big mirror for our bedroom."

"Not our ceiling?" Johnny teased.

"No, secret mirror. Or else the guys will make fun of us."

"They don't need any help."

"Not my fault my lover's the hottest person I've ever met. "

"You'll have to look in the mirror...when you get one you like. I'll introduce you."

Daniel laughed warmly kissing his shoulder. "Cheesy."

"True."

Johnny couldn't wait for the home their house would become. For the plants to grow and thrive and scent the air. For the kitchen to be in use, baking and cooking and making coffee. To have their friends and family over, to barbecue outside or float around in the pool. Or to make love in their bed so many times that they lost count.

To wake up in one another's arms in the soft morning light, limbs all tangled up but comfortable feeling the other breathing and their steady heartbeat and knowing they weren't alone, that they were home. In all ways.

“You sure it’s okay?” Daniel asked holding him in a tight way, his voice the way Johnny knew, could tell what it meant.

“Yeah,” Johnny said.

Daniel had let him…that time at the lake house. Had said it was fine. Liked it, even. And Johnny was curious.

"Pleased with your work?" Johnny asked when he caught his breath after.

He didn't know how much paint was on him, but he was sure there was plenty. He looked at his arm, holding it in front of himself looking at the blue hand print on it.

How many hand prints and finger prints were on him now?

He had to admit he was curious.

He'd take a look in the bathroom mirror before washing it off.

He looked at Daniel who was quiet, eyes dark and focused, not roaming his skin like he expected but focused on a spot between his legs.

"We going to take that shower?" Johnny asked pushing gently at Daniel's hip with his heel. Trying to get him to come back from whatever, presumably dirty, train he was on.

Daniel blinked hand catching Johnny's ankle. "Sorry, just enjoying the moment."

"Yeah, we can do that in the bathroom. I will leave you behind," Johnny said pushing himself up and kissing Daniel's cheek. "Here I thought you wanted to clean up together, but you know, it's fine. I'll shower by myself. Might be safer that way."

Daniel's brain must've still been shorted out because Johnny got up, headed towards the nearest bathroom with a shower and Daniel stayed, rooted in the spot. As soon as he was out of sight it seemed to snap whatever was going on in Daniel’s head.

"Johnny! Wait up! Where are you going?"

"Shower!" Johnny called back.

"No no no no, wait, I didn't look."

Johnny pushed the door open to the bathroom with a laugh. "What do you mean you didn't look? Weren't you staring the entire time?"

"Not at the paint though! Don't wash it off yet, please just wait a moment."

Johnny heard Daniel getting up, the sound of him running.

"Which way did you go?"

"Don't run. You'll trip on the damn tarp."

"Well where the hell are you?"

"Bathroom. You know I don't think I've ever blown your mind before. That good huh?" Johnny asked, laughing, leaning against the

doorway, waiting, feeling messy, sticky everywhere, in new places. It wasn't terrible. Just new.

Daniel stopped at the end of the hall and Johnny was thoroughly tempted to step back into the bathroom and shut the door on him. But instead he watched Daniel walk towards him. Eyes darting over him, taking in the hand prints, fingerprints, all of the mess.

"Probably should've grabbed our clothes." Johnny said thoughtfully.

"At least we brought our gym bags in here. You know, I think maybe someone knew this was going to get messy," Daniel said, accusatory.

"There is no ways I would've known this was going to happen," Johnny said stepping back into the well lit bathroom. "But painting is messy and I don't want to get paint on my Firebird's seats. It was a gift you know?"

Daniel laughed stepping into the bathroom and shutting the door behind him.

"You know there's no one else here, you technically don't have to do that."

"We could be the last people on the planet and I'd still shut that door because as soon as I didn't someone would wander in. That just happens to be our luck," Daniel said.

"That's kind of sad."

"That our luck is such shit?"

"No thinking that no one else survived."

"Yeah, okay, big bummer, forget that hypothetical. Everyone went on some vacation and we stayed home because we had work or something. Still would shut the door because even though they say they all left one of them would forget something and come here."

"That ones better," Johnny said. "So, is it just a big 'ol smear of blue?"

He wanted to look, but he also was waiting to see Daniel's reaction to his handy work. To the literal hand prints he'd left on Johnny's skin. He watched Daniel get close, walking around him, circling.

"Well?"

“It’s all very satisfying. I like it,” Daniel said walking to the sink and washing paint off his hands. Scrubbing away blue.

“I’m going to take a shower then,” Johnny said.

“You don’t want to look?” Daniel asked, quickly drying his hands off.

Johnny had planned just a quick look but Daniel was looking at him expectantly. Johnny looking in the mirror, it’d smudged a bit. From movement, from sweat, from where skin had rubbed against skin. But there were other spots that were perfect imprints of blue. Of where Daniel had touched him, held him.

Maybe getting the house ready to move into would take even longer than they expected if they kept getting distracted. If they kept reaching for one another, touching, trying new things, falling into one another again and again. Just a mess.

Johnny kissed Daniel in the shower, as warm fingers pushed back inside and Johnny wondered if getting clean really just led to getting dirty again, and if once it started it’d never end. And if that was the case, did he really care?

Chapter End Notes

The New Years Rose Parade
How to paint a room

Wildflowers and Alpine Lakes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny checked that they had everything. Looking over all the gear and pushed the boat out onto the lake.

Mr. Miyagi was wearing his fishing hat and vest. The cooler was full of food Yukie had made and drinks Sato had bought. It was a bit early for sake but Sato insisted. Tradition after all.

Johnny liked going fishing with Mr. Miyagi. It was calm and peaceful.

Chozen once asked why he liked going when he spent all week with Mr. Miyagi in the shop. Louie had asked something similar during one of the breaks in his lessons.

Fishing was like a father son thing. And while Johnny thought Daniel got that spot first, before him, fishing wasn't something Daniel particularly enjoyed. And Daniel had a lot of responsibilities.

He was training Louie in business, putting the guy through grad school, helping Tommy's aunt, and still doing all the LaRusso family responsibilities. Which meant lots and lots of phone calls and time with his mom.

And sure Johnny was busy too but, maybe on some level, he'd never had the same stable start. He'd never trade his time with his mother for anything but Daniel had grown up with two parents who loved him.

Not a father who walked out before he could remember him leaving only Coors Banquets cans and a few odds and ends to remember him by.

Not Sid who had pretend to want him and then didn't.

And when he'd gotten Mr. Miyagi as a sensei, before he even realized he was seeking out a father figure…before Mr. Miyagi, Johnny had ended up with Kreese.

Johnny stepped into the boat, sinking down on the bench opposite of Mr. Miyagi. At the shop they were usually too busy, too focused.

Here or at Mr. Miyagi's house it was calmer.

Well it had been.

Before.

Back when he'd still been in high school and came over to paint the fences and fix the roof.

He missed that time. But he was happy for Mr. Miyagi. Happy that Mr. Miyagi wasn't alone any more. That he had Yukie and Sato. That Chozen visited frequently from his apartment near the main dojo.

So this time had become their time. Without Sato and without Yukie, without Daniel or customers. And Johnny savored it. And felt guilty about it.

He wasn't sure if Daniel got the same amount of time to himself. If or when Daniel and Mr. Miyagi spent time together.

He knew they must. But he wasn't sure if it was the same or even close to the same.

Even if they did nothing but sit on Mr. Miyagi's boat and fish silently side by side for hours it was enough. It was soothing. Soothing when he started to worry that he was going about life all the wrong way. Worried about what he wanted to do or who he was.

It all seemed to melt away because, like he'd realized that first day when he went to apologize to Mr. Miyagi and thank him, he felt safe. There was no need to jump, no need to act, he could just be.

"How new house?" Mr. Miyagi asked after casting off.

"I think we're almost settled in. We moved the furniture in over the weekend from Jimmy's and Mom's. And we ordered the furniture we were missing."

Mr. Miyagi hummed.

He'd wait.

Patiently like he always did when fishing. And Johnny could take his time opening up. Figuring out what he wanted to say and how much he wanted to say.

"It feels weird," Johnny said after a while watching his line, feeling

the movement, the bob of the boat. “It feels like too much.”

Mr. Miyagi waited. He didn’t ask what felt like too much. Which was good. His mom would’ve asked. And that’s why Johnny hadn’t said it to her. Because he hadn’t figured it out yet.

He felt…overwhelmed.

“Daniel bought me a guitar. And a magic kit. A drum kit. A surfboard. A new car. So many books. A house,” Johnny said.

There was more. He knew there were things he was missing.

“If we’re keeping score, which I know we shouldn’t…I paid for his doctor’s trip to get his knee checked out, and for Okinawa…and a bunch of surprise trips. Our first apartment…he’s surpassed me with the house. It’s not like I don’t have money. I do. Is he telling me how much he loves me with stuff? Meaningful stuff but expensive stuff? The magic kit wasn’t expensive. But it was sweet. And my godchildren like it. I suppose I did the same with his birthday…I told him to celebrate everything. Every little thing. But I feel like…”

Johnny trailed off watching the sun sparkle on the water, trying to find the right words to say. It felt bad talking about Daniel to Mr. Miyagi. Daniel was more important to him. But…he was the easiest to talk to. Mr. Miyagi knew Daniel the best and had the best advice.

“I haven’t done anything to deserve it.”

“Love not earned by action or because of deserved. Love flow freely. Not kept track or even. No score in love. Not competition. Johnny-san…not good at receiving gifts or accepting help. Getting better,” Mr. Miyagi said with a soft smile. “But until forgive self, let self just live, will continue to be uncomfortable. Daniel-san see something or know something and because of love think of Johnny-san. Right? Johnny-san once play guitar, Daniel-san know and go get. Daniel-san want home, know Johnny-san does too, buys home for both. Sometime people like to give. Daniel-san type of person. Johnny-san happy because of Daniel-san, then find joy, happiness in it. Not need a return or balance of books. Because love is not money. Partnership. Not a transaction.”

Johnny watched the water for a bit, felt the breeze in his hair. There was something else that tumbled around in his head. Something he’d wanted to ask for ages, but it always got stuck in his throat.

He hadn't realized it until the second time he'd gone to Newark. Until he'd talked to Nonnio. And now it wouldn't leave. A thought that bobbed to the surface a lot.

But he never got the nerve to ask. He always swallowed it back down. Over and over again. But maybe this time. He'd try.

"Mr. Miyagi…how do I do it?"

"Do what?"

Johnny swallowed hard looking at the water of the lake.

"Forgive... myself?" he said softly voice barely a whisper.

Miyagi stare at water for a while. Contemplating the question, watching the water, the small waves that moved their boat along.

"Need to interrupt self. Already made amends, already focus emotions, learn from mistakes, been kind. Now need to stop spinning in circle. When mind replay mistake over and over and over, stop spinning and move forward. Decide what want."

That again.

What did he want?

"What if I don't know what I want?"

"Maybe…go for a walk. Maybe lots of walks."

It was worth a shot.

They had lunch, broke into the bento boxes Yukie had made and the conversation lulled into companionable silence while they watched the water. Then it fell into comfortable updates. How Louie was doing at the dojo, slowly working his way up the belt rankings, how Chozen was balancing multiple dojos with his uncle.

How Johnny was helping. How he liked it.

He liked teaching kids. It was amazing to watch them gain confidence in themselves and have fun and it reminded him of what he'd wanted out of karate, out of Cobra Kai in the first place. And he was glad they'd been able to fix it. To not leave a void in the Valley when Cobra Kai was defeated, that Sato and Chozen seemed to be thriving.

“Yukie-san take a few lessons,” Mr. Miyagi said with a soft smile.

“Really?”

“Hai. Sato-san and Miyagi teach kata at dojo to Yukie-san. Seem… happy.”

Johnny smiled. They all seemed happy, happier together. Making up for all that time lost. Maybe he’d figure out how to do that too.

Johnny was going camping.

Not with the guys, not with his mom, not with Daniel.

Just him and nature.

He was going to go hiking.

Daniel had a sales meeting with a car company out of town for the week and Mr. Miyagi and Chozen said they had everything covered.

So he was going to try it. Over a week in the woods, by himself.

He’d mapped out his route and approximate time it’d take him to walk where he was going, from starting point to end point.

Bobby would drive him to the starting point since it was a long drive and Daniel had to leave early in the morning and Johnny didn’t want to leave his Firebird at the starting point for over a week. Even if the route was a circle.

“Are you sure about this?” Bobby asked when he picked him up at dawn, yawning.

“Yeah, I think so,” Johnny said putting his heavy bag in the backseat and sitting down next to Bobby, putting on his seatbelt and shutting the door.

“Why couldn’t you have just hiked around here?”

“I want to see something new.”

“You’re not getting bored are you?” Bobby asked passing him a coffee.

“Bored about what?”

“I don’t know. Domestic life? Owning a house, Daniel, the shop.”

“Never.”

Bobby studied him when they stopped at a light.

“So this is generic finding oneself type of thing?”

“I…guess so.”

“And everything with Daniel is good?”

“Yes.”

“The romantic stuff, the living together, the…sex? Everything is fulfilling?”

Johnny coughed on his coffee.

“Listen do you know how many couples I council? It’s shocking how much couple counseling I do. And after a lot of polite toeing around it’s nearly always sex or just shit they refuse to talk about.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I’m starting to wonder if women ever orgasm in married relationships,” Bobby said with a sigh. “Like it’s the same conversation almost every damn time.”

“I’m not a woman in a married relationship,” Johnny said.

“Yeah, but like, are you both—“

“Bobby!”

“Apparently it also gets boring.”

“How would you know Mr. Popular?”

“I’ve toned it down thank you very much. So… is it…okay?”

Johnny glanced out the window as they made their way onto the I-5 North. Since they weren’t going to see each other for a while they’d spent maybe too much time the day before cuddling in front of the TV

barely watching the drama they'd planned to watch and making out instead.

And then they'd had dinner and it'd been nice, comfortable. And then Daniel had been naked when he'd gotten out of the shower and had said something about wanting to feel Johnny while on his trip since it was going to be a long one and this time Johnny wouldn't be home to call. And Johnny had watched Daniel get comfortable, on his back looking up at Johnny, moaning on his fingers, Johnny's dick. Talking dirty about wanting to feel Johnny all week.

And Johnny was happy to oblige, to do what Daniel asked, to enjoy the warmth around him. They'd both definitely…orgasmed.

"We're good."

"And the house?"

"Beautiful."

"It's not too much to take care of is it?"

"I love it."

"I mean of course you'd love it, it's a beautiful house. I just mean, you guys are re-doing a lot. Last I heard any way."

"You talked to Daniel?"

"Yeah. He said you've repainted all the rooms, put up a backsplash in the kitchen, re-tiled the bathroom and are in the midst of landscaping the garden."

"I also hooked up the TV's."

"TV's? Plural?"

"Yeah."

"Why plural?"

"I got a tiny one and put it in the kitchen for when we cook."

"So what you're going to follow some PBS cooking show?"

"I was thinking about it."

“Who are you?”

“Thanks a lot.”

“It just sounds like you’re doing a lot. What’s Daniel doing?”

“He’s helping.”

“Are you okay? Is this whole trip just a cry for help?”

“Not in that way,” Johnny said. “I’m not hurt… I’m not really… hurting. I’m just trying to…find myself I guess.”

“You’ve got a nice job with a boss you like, you live in a beautiful house that you’re remodeling, you’ve got a cool car and you’re in a committed relationship. What more could you want?”

“That’s what I want to find out.”

Bobby sighed turning and heading off onto CA-14. “I just…it sucks okay? I get it.”

“What sucks.”

“Being a star and then getting stuck in cement.”

“You feel like a star that got stuck in the mud?”

“Yeah…I mean I started Cobra Kai before you. I was the top of the class and then you came in and caught Kreese’s eye. And Jimmy’s married and has kids already…and you’ve got a house and a long term partner. And I’ve got…a practice.”

“You can get married.”

Bobby sighed. “Yeah. I know. And I know it’s not healthy to compare where I am in life to where others are. I mean hell Dutch has been in Korea for ages now. Do you get his postcards? He’s in some fancy business school out there now and he’s been traveling during his vacation periods and I don’t know…maybe I should’ve taken a gap year or something. My point is…I get it.”

“You know Daniel did that early on.”

“Did what?”

“Compared us.”

“You and me?”

“No, me and him. Mr. Miyagi took us to the beach and told us to work on balance. So we stood out in the waves and the goal was not to get knocked over. And I don’t know, I think I had a crush on him and just was ignoring it. Like I hadn’t realized it yet. But he was standing in the water doing his hardest to stay upright and he was so pissed because the waves were knocking him over and I thought, truly thought he was going to start berating the ocean and it was funny. I mean I could see it you know? Daniel, all fired up and pissed off and arguing with the ocean and yelling at it for hours.

“It was…adorable. And he went under and he popped up all mad. And I thought yeah I could see why Ali went for him. I mean sure he was small, even soaking wet but he pushed his hair out of his face and I don’t know the sun hit him right and he was beautiful. But he got pissed. Like he saw me smiling and before I knew it I was on back in the sand and he was so sure I was making fun of him and pissed that I hadn’t fallen over because this was his thing. This was Mr. Miyagi’s training.

“And I just…I don’t know, my heart had been all warm in my chest and my stomach had been weird and I’d been shoved in the car way too close to him.”

“Is this when he scratched up your thigh?”

“Yeah that was later. And all of a sudden all that warmth turned to ash and I realized this wasn’t easy. Like nothing I did wouldn’t be perceived as a threat. Daniel might never like me. But I listened to him and realized he was comparing us. And it wasn’t fair. He didn’t spend his childhood bathing in the ocean, he hadn’t gone surfing, or spent a summer as a life guard, or sleeping on the beach when things got bad at home.

“The ocean was more of my home then Sid’s mansion. He thought he had home field advantage and I had to remind him he’d only been training for six months. I…lived on the Californian beaches for most of my life. I’d been training with Cobra Kai for years. The comparison was…bad.

“But it’s hard. It’s hard not to compare. And yeah, I’m kind of jealous that Jimmy’s married. He can be married. But I was also jealous that all of you know what you wanted to do. Dutch wanted to go to Korea. You all wanted to go to UCLA. You know who you are. And I…I’ve

been running away. Every once in a while I stop and I look a little deeper and I puzzle over the pieces of who I am and try and figure it out. And I'm better than I was at 17, but I'm not there yet."

Johnny took a sip of his coffee watching through the window. "And I'm working on it. But—" he turned towards Bobby. "I'm so fucking proud of all of you."

"So you're going to go out into the woods and figure out who you are?"

"Well the woods and mountains and around the lake."

"You going to be okay?"

"Yeah. You've got my route."

"I've got it. And I know around what time to pick you up. Though I'm not looking forward to it. You're going to reek," Bobby said taking the exit to US 395. "That, Johnny is true love. And I hope you appreciate it. You're going to be out in the wilderness hiking around and absolutely disgusting when I come pick you up."

Johnny laughed. "It's going to be bad. Thanks."

"You owe me. What I haven't decided, but just know that you owe me."

"I owe you for getting up at the crack of dawn and driving me out."

"Yeah well, I'd rather make sure you get there safely. How's Miyagi-do?"

"Good. Louie's made it to a blue belt."

"Is that why he's more annoying?"

Johnny laughed. "What'd he do to you?"

"Well he must've heard Dutch calling me father or something and now every time someone offers me a drink he steps in and says 'oh no, he's a religious figure, you can't, it's really rude.' I want to strangle him. And I guess he got Chozen to believe it, so now Chozen also takes my alcohol away."

Johnny laughed. "Oh poor you."

“You laugh, but we run in the same circles. And I swear Louie’s trying to cockblock me too. Every time I talk to a girl he comes up and pats me on the shoulder and calls me ‘holy father’.”

“And the girls just run away?”

“So fast. I’ve tried to explain to him that I’m not that type of religious figure but he like wanders off every single time, head held high like he helped me and is all proud. College has not made him less annoying. I don’t know how you lived with him for so long.”

“He’s not bad.”

“No. He’s not bad, he’s just stopping me from enjoying life.”

“Aren’t you supposed to lead by example?”

“Yeah, but I should also be able to enjoy my life.”

“Isn’t forgiveness a big thing?”

Bobby sighed. “Yeah. It is. Which is why I haven’t head-butted him.”

“How’s Tommy doing?”

“Good. He says holding an office keeps him busier than he ever expected. But having someone like myself come by frequently looks good for his image. So we have lunch like once a week. His desk is intense. It’s drowning in paperwork.”

“He’s not overdoing it is he?”

“Nah, he’s got a goal and he’s going for it. Pretty proud of him actually. His campaigns are going well. He’ll be at the lake house next month for a mini vacation, so we’ll all see him then.”

“I send flowers a lot. But he’s been so busy I haven’t had a chance to see him. I mean we’re kind of stuck in phone tag at the moment.”

“Yeah that happens. For a while I was just conversing with him via my answering machine and his answering machine,” Bobby said with a laugh.

“How are your siblings?”

“Annoying. Can you believe they’re in high school? It makes me feel so old.”

“They can drive now right?”

“Yeah. Hate that. Time’s weird,” Bobby said with a sigh. “They’re driving, going on dates, I don’t know how Jimmy’s going to handle it.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to handle it,” Johnny said.

“Do you have everything you’ll need? You’re planning to be gone for ten days.”

“Yeah, the trail can be about three weeks but I thought that might be too long.”

“I don’t think Daniel could handle three weeks without you.”

“I don’t think I could handle three weeks without him,” Johnny said. “A couple weeks was bad enough the last time he had to go one one of these. I think it’ll do me some good to be…moving while he’s gone. You know?”

“But you’ve got stuff for the mountains and the cold stuff and a tent and you’ll be able to carry it?” Bobby asked as he parked. “Welcome to Lake Tahoe.”

“Yeah. Thank you Bobby.”

“You… be careful out there okay? If you’re not at the meeting point in ten days I’m sending a search party in after you. Got it?”

“Yeah I understand,” Johnny said hopping out and grabbing his bag.

He settled the bag over his shoulders and headed towards the entrance to the trail.

Ten days of just him.

He’d dreamed of it most of his youth. Disappearing into nature and living off the land.

However that’d been an escape, a run away back up plan for when things fell a part. But when Mr. Miyagi had told him to take a walk the idea had floated up.

He’d take a camera and he’d go hiking while Daniel was out of town.

He was starting at Big Meadow and would hopefully see something beautiful while he was out in the wild. Wildflowers and alpine lakes.

He'd packed sandwiches and fishing gear.

He had all his permits.

He was ready.

Or, he thought he was ready. As ready as he'd ever planned, more so actually. He'd checked out tons of books from the library. Daniel had taken him to a bookstore again and he'd gotten a couple of maps and guides on hiking.

He felt…spoiled.

Undeservedly so.

He'd told Daniel in Okinawa he didn't need anything. That Daniel returning his feelings was enough to make him happy. But maybe the gifts were for him but weren't 100% for him.

Daniel was thriving. He was doing well with his businesses. He got money from Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees as co-owner. LaRusso Auto was doing well. He'd bought his mother a new car again.

He was putting Louie Jr. through a bachelors and masters program.

He flew his grandparents out a couple times a year.

Johnny hadn't had much, but he had time. He wondered if the time he spent helping was similar. A similar way to show love and care. Daniel was delighted every time Johnny brought him a bouquet, every time he made dinner, every time he stopped by the dealership for lunch or coffee. And it made Daniel happy to give Johnny things.

He'd made that clear. So why was he uncomfortable?

He prodded the feeling carefully.

It connected.

He didn't feel like he deserved it. Because it had felt like he had to work for everything. Every crumb of affection from Kreese, to be seen by his classmates, to get things he wanted from Sid.

It was weird to get things just because someone loved him and thought of him. His mother hadn't been able to afford doing that. Everything was a necessity, or small. And now…now he didn't know how to deal with it.

He thought he needed to do all the work. He needed to give and give and give until there was nothing left and then dredge up some final piece of himself to give. It was a little root of Cobra Kai, leftover from trying to please Kreese. Working himself to the bone for scraps of compliments.

To be given all the things that had been taken away was overwhelming. To be gifted things just felt so undeserved and he didn't know how to handle it.

How did he keep accepting things from Daniel without breaking into tears every single time? Or was that fine? Daniel seemed fine with cupping his face and brushing away tears and whispering soft warm things to him.

Maybe it was healing. Healing to pick up a guitar again, to drive the Firebird. He just was tense…waiting for the other shoe to drop, to learn what was wanted from him in exchange.

And that was Sid. Sid giving him something in exchange for a task, for an event to show up to be the dutiful son dancing with someone, making him look good. Or to have it taken away when the mood suited him.

But Daniel wasn't Kreese or Sid. And Johnny knew that. But the wiring was still there. All the protected defenses. They didn't go up all the time. They weren't set off as much any more. He didn't get tense when Daniel asked to drive, or offered to work on the Avanti or Firebird.

He trusted Daniel and let him drive off with his car. Usually it came back so polished and pretty that it hurt to look at.

It'd taken a while, but he'd worked with Daniel on so many cars when he was setting up the mechanical side of LaRusso Auto that he knew Daniel knew his way around a car, and cared an awful lot from the way he interacted with his customers.

He didn't get nervous as much when he sparred with Daniel when he came to the dojo. He'd always been scared for Daniel's knee. But years of watching Daniel run in his intramural soccer games had assured him that Daniel's knee was fine, unless it was raining. Then sometimes it bothered him. But not enough to hinder him in any way.

He'd started weaning himself off of showing up with gifts. The first time Nonnia and Nonno came to visit he'd gone to pick them up in the

Avanti with a bouquet for each of them. Now he just went to pick them up.

He still gave gifts, but it was more of souvenirs when he traveled and less of a 'I'm sorry for existing I hope this makes up for it'. Which he realized it'd become.

He hadn't taken flowers or wine to Lucille in ages. Instead he just asked while he was at the store if she needed anything and if she was out of milk or something he'd pick it up with their groceries and take it over. Same with Abuela. He went by with groceries at least once week for her. Which was a task he'd left for Chozen while he was hiking the Tahoe Rim.

That was more out of love though. Care and concern. When he visited Dutch in Korea he brought deodorant and snacks he missed from the states. He took his godchildren gifts when he saw something he thought they'd like. He made sure when he went grocery shopping to get the snacks Daniel liked.

Johnny stopped when he saw wildflowers.

There'd been a few along the way but now there was a meadow of them. Violets and shootings stars. It was around where he'd planned to have his lunch.

Ten days.

By himself.

And it was so quiet that his heartbeat and his breath and the sound of his foot steps were thunderous.

He wondered if he'd be able to handle it. He hadn't gone that long without talking to Daniel in years. He wondered if maybe he should've stayed home. Then he would've at least heard Daniel's voice over the phone.

He wasn't ready for that. To sleep in a tent by himself without hearing Daniel on the phone or feeling the warmth of him by his side. He wasn't even sure if he'd sleep that well.

But he also felt like he had to do it.

He had to be out in the woods.

He had to take the time to… be by himself.

He was just nervous about what he'd uncover.

What if he still…hated himself?

What if he couldn't stand who he was and that silence became overpowering?

What if that was why he always got so busy because any time by himself and he'd just…sink to rock bottom?

His food was good.

He'd made a salad for the start of his journey.

He also had onigiri that Yukie had made him and tamales from Abuela.

The flowers in the meadow bowed in the breeze and the air filled with the smell of wildflowers and it was beautiful.

He wished Daniel was there to see them.

Eventually he got up and kept going. Slowly making his way around the rim.

He pitched a tent at night, at the campsite he'd planned, marking his way along his map, occasionally using the compass Tommy had given him to make sure he was going the right way and he stared up at the stars, listening to the sounds of nature.

He'd taken pictures along the way and now lay in his sleeping bag with a battery powered book light that Daniel had given him, reading one of the books he'd gotten the last time they'd gone together to the bookstore.

It was…peaceful and lonely.

If Daniel was there he'd have wiggled his way into the same sleeping bag with Johnny until there was no space. And Johnny would've complain but he'd sleep like a rock.

He was sleeping impossibly better, he assumed, because of Daniel.

He'd been a light sleeper most of his life.

In the car it was so he could wake his mom if someone came snooping around so she could pretend they were just parking momentarily in a spot.

At Sid's it was to get out of the way and make his way onto the roof if he was pissed early in the morning or before going to bed.

And then he'd gone to Okinawa and kept missing all the bad stuff, and then he got hurt, and then there'd been Silver breaking in. There'd been nightmares about Sid and Kreese. About himself, waking up with blood on his own hands only to actually wake up and there'd be nothing.

And then sometimes he just wasn't able to sleep.

His body seemed to just boot him awake sometimes like an old school farmer and he'd be awake and couldn't sleep again. So he'd make things from when he was little. Fried baloney sandwiches, vienna sausages, spam, instant food, corned beef and hash with an egg.

He hadn't ever wanted to wake Daniel, but then Daniel had gotten nervous. So he'd started to.

He'd roll over and tell him "Gonna make a snack." And Daniel would mumble something sleepily and a moment later would follow him into the kitchen and lean his head into Johnny's back, with is arms around his waist, continuing to sleep but also awake.

And then they'd eat and curl up on the couch because it was cooler and Johnny would fall asleep there, with Daniel fast asleep on top of him.

It didn't make sense. But it helped.

The weight, Daniel's heartbeat and breath and warmth all helped. And he'd be out till morning.

It wasn't all the time.

He slept better more frequently now. In their house, in their bed, with Daniel plastered to him no matter how he rolled away from him through the night. Johnny was pretty sure, but hadn't tested it, that if he got too hot and decided to sleep on the floor Daniel would roll off right on top of him.

There were other hikers along the way, hikers who coalesced for a

brief time from the PCT. They talked to him, about where they were from, why they were doing it, about everything and he saw pictures of their kids, friends, family and pets.

He got to show off the photos in his wallet. Photos of Daniel, of him and the guys, his mom, Mr. Miyagi, his students.

It helped pass the time. Because all he did was think and think and think.

He breathed, he did kata in the misty mornings, he took photos, he ate, he read.

Daniel had the better photos.

He'd taken up scrapbooking at some point and Johnny loved them. He'd never had memories so neatly organized like they were treasured. It was something Daniel did to unwind, something he did with his mom. And sometimes when Johnny felt overwhelmed or bad he'd sit in the living room and go through them.

He loved watching Daniel work on them, head bent over a book with little pieces of colorful paper around him and photos. He always got copies. So many copies.

The staff at the photo development drive-thru knew them by sight at this point.

Photos went to Nonnia and Nonnio, to their moms, and for them into the scrapbooks. The finished products were always lovely. And Daniel always seemed unsure passing them over to Johnny when he was done and sitting next to him, explaining what he did and when Johnny told him how much he loved every single one of them, with so much sincerity Daniel looked so happy. Just like he did whenever he came home and found Johnny going through them again. Curling up next to him on the couch to reminiscence with him.

About halfway through his hike he realized he was near a trail head again. The trail got noisy with people. Students on a field trip. He passed them while they had an early lunch. And then they passed him when he stopped for his lunch.

It reminded him of when they'd taken the dojo out camping. It was a tradition now, a sort of new tradition for the younger kids because a mom had apparently asked Sato about it and Sato thought it was a wonderful idea. It'd been a little weird at first.

Jimmy had helped them over the phone draft up permission slips and waivers and then Johnny had gone to the park early with Chozen and Louie Jr. and waited for kids to be dropped off.

It had been so nerve wracking the first year. He hadn't felt old enough to be in charge of kids over night in a forest. He wasn't some summer camp counselor. He wasn't trained. He wasn't old enough for parents to just pass their kids off to.

But Chozen and Sato had been adamant and reminded him again and again that he was good with kids, that he was trained in CPR and first aid, that he would be fine.

And he was. It'd been great.

Once a year for a weekend in the summer they went.

But this year the kids had been cranky. Upset about something and there'd been a fight or the start of one and they'd had to separate them. Divide them up.

It'd been bad.

It'd taken a while, Chozen had stuck with most of them at camp and Johnny had taken the angriest one for a walk.

The kid had been sullen, kicking at the path, hands shoved in pockets, following Johnny.

Johnny tried to think of what Mr. Miyagi would do. Tried to think of all the times he'd seen Mr. Miyagi very easily and very succinctly redirect anger into something calm and useful. But it seemed…weird to do it himself. So they walked and walked and walked.

And then they came up to the view Johnny had gone towards, a beautiful spot, high up, right at sunset. And the kid had stopped and looked and then sunk down on a rock and Johnny had sat down nearby.

He didn't know what to say or what to do.

He wasn't Mr. Miyagi.

He didn't have good advice or a calming presence.

He was a mess himself.

“I fucked up.”

Johnny didn’t move, didn’t say a word. He felt like when he sat on the boat with Mr. Miyagi.

If he moved, if he made a noise the kid would clam up. And then this trip, a trip the kids enjoyed, would end with unhappy campers. But he frowned a little at the language.

“Right, sorry sensei.”

Sensei was a title he still didn’t like the weight of. Mr. Miyagi never asked to be called sensei which meant the only sensei he knew…his sensei…had been Kreese. And putting himself anywhere near that man stung. But there was no other thing to call him. It was weird to call Chozen sensei and not him. And the kids did it automatically. He was getting used to it, in increments. Slowly. Even though it felt awkward.

“But I did. And now they all hate me.”

“They’re not dead,” Johnny said.

“Well… no.”

“Then you can apologize.”

“What if they don’t…accept it?”

“Action. Show them your sorry. If it’s something you can fix, fix it. If it’s something you can work on in yourself then work on it. Do something. Don’t just stew in it. If they don’t accept it, then find ground where you can at least be cordial. Even if that means giving them space and time.”

His mind kept circling back to that conversation as he hiked.

Towards that camping trip and his conversation with Mr. Miyagi.

He kept thinking of the last time he’d been in Okinawa, for a festival and another modeling campaign. Daniel had taken so many pictures, chatting with the photography team, the magazines. He hadn’t thought it’d be fun, but it was.

He’d never have thought that that Fotorama that Daniel had gotten for his birthday would become such a loved hobby. That Daniel would get more use out of Johnny’s camera he got from his mom then Johnny himself. And he got so many good photos of him and the kids from

Tomi village, they taught him a new dance and new songs on the sanshin.

He thought a lot about everything. About dumb stuff like what sort of plant he wanted to add to the garden, about different meals he wanted to make when he got back.

He wanted to cook in their kitchen with Daniel, let his arm run along his waist as he moved around him to see what he was working on. He wanted to press a kiss into the side of his neck and hug him close, breathing in his aftershave.

He thought about the shop more than he expected to. He thought about the dojo and the Firebird sitting in the garage at home next to the Avanti and the Ford and Daniel's fancy shiny luxury car.

He was tired.

His feet hurt.

He was exhausted, when he laid down to sleep sometimes it still felt like he was stumbling forward.

Onward and onward and onward.

What was the point?

Why had he decided sleeping on the ground in a tent for ten days was a good idea?

And why'd he give himself only ten days?

He couldn't stop and take a break.

He had to keep going. Or else Bobby would freak out.

He passed out as soon as he crawled into his tent.

He slept until the tent got warm and the sunlight made it impossible to keep sleeping.

He made himself breakfast then packed up and moved on.

A circle.

Why on Earth had he picked a trail that was a circle?

Because it'd be pretty?

Because there were wildflowers and a lake and mountains?

Because he wanted to hike through the snow?

What was wrong with him?

He could've been in bed.

He could've been sleeping at his nice beautiful house and getting up early to go for a swim in the pool, he could've made coffee and sat in the garden watching flowers bloom.

He could've heard Daniel's voice every day.

But no.

He thought why not do something he wanted to do?

Why not see how he fared living off the land, off of everything he could carry on his back, why not see if he could rely on himself?

But hell he'd learned he could rely on others…right?

Right?

Maybe high school him could've done it. Picked a trail and lived out in the wilderness for months at a time until he found some small town he liked where no one knew him or cared about karate or the valley.

But he liked home. He liked his pillow and the giant whale shark plush that kept him company whenever Daniel was out of town. That he sometimes hugged to his chest while Daniel held him.

He liked watering his bonsai and Daniel's bonsai and moving them to get better sunlight.

He liked playing guitar, practicing the sanshin, the drums.

He liked washing and waxing the cars, even the Avanti and Ford that were no longer driven as much.

He missed home.

He missed Daniel.

He missed eating real food.

He was tired of oatmeal.

The difference wasn't that he'd gotten older. Not just. The difference was that that plan, it'd been a necessity. A just in case panic button or escape hatch. And he didn't need it.

Camping was more enjoyable when he wasn't alone. He liked camping with the guys, with Daniel who always liked to remind him of their first camping trip and reminisce. He liked camping with Daniel. Surprising him with a basket of food he made.

With students he got to get to know a bit better than he did during class. It was more bonding then usual and he got to know them beyond just students.

People.

And it was weird to recognize himself in them. He understood their frustrations, knew how to guide them along. He was worried he was going to screw up, but then he'd see them get frustrated or mad and he'd understand.

He watched that last batch a couple weeks ago, the way they worked together and healed their riff and the way the kid who'd talked to him had trailed behind.

"It was too easy."

He knew that feeling. He knew what wasn't being said. An accepted apology for fucking up and how it'd healed like there wasn't any cracks.

"They've forgiven you. You can't beat yourself up forever. Just try not to do it again and make your amends and then…forgive yourself."

Forgive yourself.

It sounded so damn easy to say to a kid. And the kid had nodded. But that was what Johnny was doing wasn't it?

Even after all this time.

He couldn't accept Daniel's gifts without feeling uncomfortable because he felt like he hadn't earned them.

That he was unworthy of the love he received, especially on such a large scale. But to Daniel…it was just like buying groceries for Abuela. He wanted the same thing Johnny wanted.

Johnny wanted Daniel to be happy and safe with him. And Daniel just wanted Johnny to feel the same, loved and supported. But Johnny was acting like he and love were oil and water. They didn't mix. And all the kindness he was shown always shocked and surprised him. Even though…it shouldn't.

He'd been so mad at himself and felt like he'd deserved everything. Like maybe people had seen how awful he was and that's why Sid and Kreese had treated him the way they had.

That that was why it'd taken him so long to make friends. But that wasn't it.

He hadn't…deserved that. No one deserved that.

And Daniel hadn't deserved the way he'd been treated. And he'd forgiven Johnny and the guys. He'd worked through it and now…now he showered Johnny with love every chance he got.

He missed it.

He missed being with Daniel.

He missed his beautiful big brown eyes and his smile and his laugh and his soft hair and his warm hands.

He missed how solid he was, how real.

He missed listening to him talk.

It was too quiet by himself out in the woods.

Daniel always had stories to tell and Johnny didn't care if he'd heard them a thousand times.

He just liked hearing Daniel talk, liked hearing what he thought.

He was worried going out into the woods might remind him that he hated himself.

But…he didn't. Not any more.

He just had to let go.

He was holding onto the past so tightly that his hands were stiff.

When was the last time he'd slept on alert?

The first apartment?

That had been years ago.

Daniel really could take care of himself and didn't need Johnny to wake up and defend him.

Hell if someone broke into their house Daniel would be after them before Johnny even fully woke up.

He was comfortable.

It was because he'd taken that hand outstretched out to him. He'd taken it and that hand hadn't let go. And eventually his walls went down and it was safe. The ground beneath his feet was sturdy. Even when it wasn't. Even when he was on that balance wheel in Mr. Miyagi's garden, Daniel was on the other side helping him keep balance. And if he fell in, if he slipped and lost his foot, Daniel was always there to hold that hand out towards him again and again, to help him up, make sure he was okay and try again.

And when things were bad for Daniel he was there to do the same.

He'd made another best friend.

He had five best friends and he'd never expected to be so lucky that he got to live with one of them, and love them and be loved in return. And they had his back, just like he had theirs. No matter what path they chose or what path he picked.

And that was a different question.

Now that he was done spinning in circles, rooted in the spot and just spinning like a top, what did he want to do?

What had he enjoyed?

He liked modeling for Daniel.

But he still didn't want to do that full time.

It was just a fun hobby and if he was honest. Some of the fun photos… he never wanted anyone else to see. They were just for him and

Daniel. And money wasn't an issue.

He could be a trophy husband if he wanted, something he'd nearly accepted being a long long time ago. Even if he couldn't get the document this time round to make it official.

But he knew he'd get bored. Sitting around at home was boring. Even if he spent most of the day reading or playing music or gardening.

He needed to move.

He'd enjoyed working on the floats for the rose parade.

That'd been a tradition he'd enjoyed every year for a while.

He liked going to the market and making bouquets to take home to Daniel or to send to loved ones.

He missed flowers.

He missed the florist shop he grew up in. Even if it'd been for such a short time.

Oh what a dumbass he was.

What a fucking idiot.

He liked working with Mr. Miyagi not just because it was Mr. Miyagi but because it was plants. Because it reminded him of the florist shop. He knew how to run one, they'd taught him, he'd memorized that flower book, he spent all his free time drawn over and over and over again to the flower market.

He wanted to be florist.

He'd spent so long refusing to look forward because he hadn't forgiven himself that he'd missed the most obvious thing.

He'd spent most of his childhood daydreaming about flowers, drawing different ones to give to the florists, hell he gave Ali the most ridiculous bouquets he could think of because he knew she wouldn't care but they were fun and daring and it'd been the highlight of his year was coming up with ridiculously expensive Valentines Day bouquets with the local florist.

And Sid hadn't cared because he liked that the price meant it was good. Even if it was possibly the ugliest design Johnny had ever seen.

He'd always gone to see the florist after and they'd laughed about the design or talked about how it would've actually been better if they'd done xyz. Because really Ali had just enjoyed the spectacle. She'd enjoyed being given a large bouquet that was heavy and bright. What it translated to didn't matter.

With Daniel he'd put so much care into it. Every leaf had a meaning, every shock of color and flower spoke volumes. Because Johnny hadn't been able to articulate it.

With Ali it'd seemed simple but with Daniel he hid behind his flowers and Daniel would open up the book on the language of flowers and pour over it like Johnny had given him a mystery to solve and then he'd find Johnny and whisper everything back to him.

All the I love you's, all the beauty and warm wishes.

And it was an overwhelming crash of waves. But he'd been heard. His feelings went through and were met and returned in a way that had never happened before.

His feet felt like lead, his muscles sore as he hiked for days on end until the final day.

He got up early, ate the last of his oatmeal, took down his tent and gathered all of his things from camp and walked fast.

He didn't care if he had to sit in the parking lot and wait for hours for Bobby.

He wanted to get home as soon as possible.

He wanted to take a hot shower.

He wanted to be home, with Daniel and to sleep all tangled up in their bed.

He would've run.

He would've left his stuff behind and bolted the last stretch of the hike, but he'd packed his Walkman, his camera that Daniel loved, he had a few library books, things Daniel had given him, and he wasn't about to litter and get banned from the park and trail. Plus he felt so light he feared he might float off.

He forced himself to slow down once he started getting close. There

was no point running like he was being chased by something into a parking lot and scaring students or people out for a day hike. Especially if Bobby wasn't there.

He adjusted the straps of his bag. He'd stop by and chat with the rangers for a bit while he waited.

The wooden building was open and he stepped inside walking past brochures looked around, chatted for a short period, signed their book and got a little patch.

He stared at it as he walked back out to the parking lot.

165 miles

He'd hiked through the Sierra mountains, he'd slept in the desolation wilderness. He'd taken so many pictures that he'd used up all the film he'd brought. And now he was exhausted. Maybe he'd sleep for a week. And he'd wake up feeling better.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

Johnny turned, he'd been walking towards a bench to sit and wait. But there in a rumpled suit was Daniel.

Johnny turned around so fast he nearly fell over from the weight of his bag.

"You know Bobby warned me you might look liked you'd spent a week rolling around in the dirt. Glad he said he brought towels. You're like that Peanuts character that leaves dust around everywhere they move."

"Can I pick you up?"

"Not a hello? Fine yes, to be fair I'm disgusting too. I got up at like dawn to drive."

Johnny lifted him up, he probably should've taken his backpack off first, probably should've done a lot of things, but instead he just looked up at Daniel and smiled.

"I missed you," Johnny said.

"Got lonely on the trail huh? Is that why your hands went straight for my ass?" Daniel asked with a soft laugh. "I missed you too. So did you have fun? See anything cool?"

“I took a lot of pictures.”

“We’ll go get them developed. How much of them are just pretty flowers?”

“Some. You’ll be proud of me though. I asked strangers to take photos of me.”

“Hell yeah.”

“I thought it’d be nice, I was thinking of you and the scrapbooks and a scrapbook of just flowers sounded…well I’d like it, but I wanted proof that I’d been there you know? So I just…asked people and they were more than happy to take my photo. No clue how they’ll turn out but surely one of them will be nice.”

“Oh hell Johnny you reek,” Bobby said walking over from one of the vending machines with some drinks. “You’re both so gross. Why am I even here?”

“Because I drove through the night to get to you to come with and because Johnny’s been hiking for days and you don’t want us to die if either of us try to drive because you love us?” Daniel said.

“Yeah yeah. It’s always love. Johnny take that bag off before you fall over like a damn turtle and can’t get back up again.”

“I don’t want to.”

“What do you mean you don’t want to? Is the damn thing fused to your back?”

“No, because I’d have to put Daniel down.”

“Yeah, that’s how that’d have to work. Give him a kiss and put the poor guy down.”

Johnny gave Daniel a squeeze watching him squirm, then laugh. Grinning up at Daniel as he leanned down and kissed him, cupping the side of Johnny’s face, fingers rubbing the beard that’d grown on the trail.

“Aw come on, really, this is ridiculous. Johnny I thought you’d be exhausted, but you’re like Frenching. Come on get to the car before both of you pass out. Idiots. You’re both idiots. Daniel for driving through the night and showing up at my doorsteps scaring the shit out

of me right as I was leaving, asking if he'd made it in time to come with, looking all wild eyed and shit because he hadn't slept and had pounded more coffee then anyone should. And Johnny, you're fucking covered in dirt and dust and you both smell. I thought you know, it'll be fine they'll pass out in the back seat and sleep the rest of the way home. But nah, you two are still like teenagers and it's going to feel like I'm escorting horny prom night teenagers home. Can you two like keep it, I don't know, PG on the way home?"

Johnny set Daniel back down gently.

"You're the best Bobby."

"You mean I'm all you've got," Bobby said motioning them towards his car. "Jimmy and Tommy are too busy, Dutch is still in Korea. Daniel would flip if Chozen picked you up. Johnny refuses to get in the car if Louie's driving. Mr. Miyagi's running the shop. Really your only options were me or your mom."

Johnny unclipped his bag and set it in the trunk. "Do you have some towels? I'll sit on those."

"I do. Daniel reminded me, it was what he carried out of his car. And I told my siblings if they cleaned my car after this trip the could keep all the change they found and if they did a good job I'd drive them somewhere. You'd be surprised how easily motivated they are by car change. And not being driven by our parents."

"Don't they get like a fancy allowance?" Daniel asked opening the back door and holding it open for Johnny.

Johnny felt a warm hand on top of his head, ensuring he didn't bump it as he climbed in.

"Oh you gotta work for that at the Brown house. You either have to debate Mom and Dad and present why you need it and have a good excuse for not working at the shop. Or you've got to work at the shop," Bobby said as they got in, starting the car while Daniel and Johnny buckled their seatbelts and pulling out of the lot. "Johnny say happy trails to the trail, tonight you sleep in a real bed. No more wild wilderness man for you. If Daniel lets you in the house. Seriously what did you do to yourself?"

"It's dust from the trail."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Daniel doesn't just hose you down before

you're allowed inside to shower."

"We were thinking of making a pool house with a shower in it," Daniel said thoughtfully. He kept reaching out and touching Johnny's face, running his fingers over his jaw, feeling the beard that'd been so itchy at first. "That way if we got muddy or something we could clean off instead of tracking it in the house."

"And progress on that? Johnny where do you want to eat man? It's at least a six hour drive back."

"I had oatmeal."

"You both look grimy and miserable. How about I stop by at one of those trucker rest stops? We can get you both touristy t-shirts and shorts and flip flops and you can rent the showers and then we'll continue the rest of the way home?"

"What will you do?"

"I don't know, maybe I'll buy a donuts or something. You want a donut? Or hey, they got those giant slushees. Maybe I'll get one of those. Think about what you want to eat while you're in there."

"That'd be nice," Johnny said.

Daniel held his hand. Which was also nice. He was so stunned Daniel was there.

The person he'd wanted to see the most, that he almost wanted to skip the shower, skip the meal and just go home, to be home with Daniel.

But they stopped.

He showered and put on neon clothes, a bright pink shirt and neon yellow pants while Daniel got stuck with the opposite, a neon yellow shirt and pink shorts and flip flops covered in palm trees.

"Ah you two look perfect, you're just missing the sunglasses and these."

Johnny frowned at the bucket hat set on his head, price tag already removed.

"I thought, at one point you were adamant that I was a fashion disaster and that you were a fashion guru and this is what you came up with?" Johnny asked.

Bobby grinned motioning towards them with his slushee. “I work with what I’ve got.”

“I swear I see a regular t-shirt over there.”

“I think he had a different reason for this,” Daniel said squinting at his shirt. “You’re hard to look at, I’m hard to look at. Maybe he thinks we’ll keep our hands to ourselves like this.”

“Next time you spend the night and need to borrow something to wear, this is what you’re wearing,” Johnny said following them back out to the car.

“Complain all you want, it’s clean.”

“Yeah, thanks Bobby.”

Part way through the journey, through explaining his trip Daniel started to yawn and Johnny patted his lap. “Go ahead and nap, I’ll wake you when we stop for lunch.”

Daniel adjusted his seat belt and laid his head in Johnny’s lap. Johnny played with his hair, watching him fall asleep.

“So how was it?” Bobby asked.

“It was pretty,” Johnny said. “I mean it’s not done yet, I had to hitchhike for part of it because they’re not set to finish it until the new millennia.”

“You hitchhiked?”

“Yeah had to a couple of times. They didn’t complain as much about how I smelled.”

“You really wanted to sit back there with Daniel for over six hours in dirt and sweat?”

“No. Its not like I didn’t try to bathe. I went for swims when I could.”

“Know where you want to eat?”

“Anywhere as long as I can get something not from a can or oatmeal.”

“How about a burger?”

“Sounds divine.”

“I try,” Bobby said with a grin. “You find yourself in there? On that trail? Find some enlightenment or something?”

“Yeah. I think so. Maybe a bit of something you’d preach in your sermons.”

“And what would that be?”

“Forgiveness,” Johnny said ever so softly, but he caught the look of Bobby in the rear view mirror, the warm smile on his face and knew he’d heard. And he looked down at Daniel, curled up asleep in his lap, snoring gently and ran the back of his finger along his cheek feeling better, lighter than he had in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

165 miles is 265.5 km
Tahoe Rim Trail

Per Cent'anni, For a Hundred Years

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tommy called him at the office.

Jimmy called as he was digging around in his desk.

He bumped his head against it before finding what he was looking for and answered the phone.

It was essentially the same conversation.

He wondered if he'd get two more, but he doubted it.

He wouldn’t be there for it anyway.

He hurried out of his office, throwing on his jacket.

"Sheila, I'm going to be out the rest of the day, could you hold my...well everything?"

"Of course Mr. LaRusso."

Daniel rushed out to his car, missing the Ford desperately, wishing he'd driven it to work or had thought to. But he hadn’t known when they’d call.

How long had it been since he’d last driven the Ford?

Things were different. Like the photography equipment in the backseat.

Working two jobs, one somewhat a secret was exhausting. But he wasn’t the only one wearing multiple hats.

He stopped in front of Miyagi-do, the original one that Chozen had built on the ashes of Cobra Kai, parking and hurrying through the doors, running sweaty hands over his jacket.

"Yo Cuz, isn't it a work day?" Louie asked.

Maybe the weirdest part was that Louie hadn't ever really gone home. He’d gone home to graduate high school and to spend time with his

family. But then he'd come back.

He had moved out. And then Daniel had put him through college and a masters program, worked him hard at the dealership.

He could run the place now. But he still liked going to the dojo. He always took his lunch break and worked out for a bit before coming back. Said it helped him refocus.

Daniel toed out of his shoes, past photographs that he knew Louie persistently requested stay up. Photos of Louie's first tournament, smiling proudly with his third place trophy while Chozen stood stony faced beside him. Probably cursing his luck that Louie decided to learn karate and that Chozen couldn't turn away students.

No escape from LaRusso's.

It brought Daniel a little bit of joy.

Evil joy.

That Louie had moved into an apartment near the dojo.

That he was constantly keeping someone elses' hands full.

Officially he said it was because he wanted to go to the dojo before and after work to practice.

Unofficially he seemed to look up to Chozen and liked spending time with him.

Not that Chozen had gotten that memo and just seemed confused about having a tall broad shouldered LaRusso following him around like a puppy wanting to help him with stuff.

True evil joy came from how it seemed to drive Chozen up the wall and tested his new leaf with a sledge hammer.

Sometimes, especially at the start, Daniel got great joy out of seeing Chozen's eye twitch.

A friendship born from White Day that Daniel took pleasure from. It was his fault and his sweet revenge.

"What do you want?" Chozen asked, arms crossed as Daniel stopped to look at the blonde in the photo.

"Is he in?"

"My co-sensei is not here at the moment," Chozen said, a little smugly.

He liked saying that. Co-sensei. It wasn't even like they were always working together. It wasn't like he stayed late nights all the time. He just...helped out sometimes. With the kid classes.

"Why are you here?" Chozen repeated while Daniel tried to think of where else to go.

Daniel thought, why not? And dug out the box from his pocket to show Chozen.

"No," Chozen said.

"It's not for you," Daniel said looking at it again, wondering if maybe he'd picked the wrong one.

But he couldn't have. He'd gotten so much feedback.

It was perfect.

Chozen was just being...Chozen.

There were dance trophies mixed in with the karate trophies and photos of Kumiko and her students sharing the same space with the Miyagi-do students.

It was always fun when she was in town. They danced the nights away and the kids, the Miyagi-do students learned to love dancing with her. They picked up new ways to be light on their feet and to move.

Daniel thought Chozen would've hated that. That it'd be another delicious piece of karma. But Chozen didn't mind. Or at least didn't seem to.

He was fairly certain Chozen helped out with the dance competitions sometimes, drove dance kids to their performances, helped pick up costumes, did their make up. At least that's what Louie said. But Louie said a lot of things.

He heard her soft feet on the mat.

"Want some tea?" Kumiko asked.

"No, if he's not here I gotta go look elsewhere."

"Everything okay?" she asked concerned.

Chozen muttered something in Okinawan and she gasped hands flying to her mouth and then grinning quickly motioning for him to leave, to hurry.

"See you at Mr. Miyagi's?" Daniel asked shoving his feet back into his shoes and returning to the door.

"Of course."

"Sensei thought it was for him," Louie said with a laugh.

"Did you switch which one you like nii-san?" Kumiko asked with a laugh.

"Quiet, both of you. You're giving me a headache."

Kumiko was only in town part of the year. Her lessons were only for the season. She traveled the rest of it, dancing on the stages herself. Performing everywhere.

Daniel had been to twenty performances and teased her, asking when his punch card would earn him a free pass to some nice ballet performance.

He kept requesting the Nutcracker and she kept laughing saying one day, one day.

He drove down to Reseda, trying to keep an eye out for the red car.

He was looking for a red Firebird, well loved and even more lovingly maintained.

He saw it parked and hurried into the shop pushing open the door and hearing the clatter of the wooden chimes and of the gentle sound of the glass furin dancing on the wind.

The scent of flowers and dirt was overwhelming.

It was a slow day, no customers. The blonde at the front desk was surrounded by flowers and his head was in his hand as he read a book, sitting with all his florist tools, lost in the pages of his book.

Daniel had memorized what he was going to say if he was at the dojo.

It’d been different if he’d been at the shop.

He'd practiced it to himself in his office so many times his staff repeated it back to him in playful jokes.

He knocked gently on the counter.

"Could I get a bouquet of daisies (loyal love), arum (ardor), arbutus (Thee Only Do I Love), red camellia (You're a Flame in My Heart), pink camilla (Longing for You), flax (Domestic Symbol), holly (Domestic Happiness), Jonquil (love Me; Affection Returned; Desire; Desire for Affection Returned), Honeysuckle (Devoted love; Fidelity), orange blossom (Innocence; Eternal Love; Marriage and Fruitfulness), peony (Gay Life; Happy Marriage), phlox (Our souls united/ Our hearts are united.), Austrian rose (Thou art all that is lovely), white rose (I'm worthy of you), mossy rosebuds (Confessions of Love), and do you have any ivy (marriage) and four leaf clovers (be mine)?"

"That's the...weirdest boquet I've ever heard of," Johnny said looking up from his book.

"Also, I'm supposed to have a tree to pick up."

Johnny's brow furrowed and he looked around before picking up a small bonsai off the back of the shelf, looking at the tags and seeing the one with Daniel's name on it.

"What kind of tree is it?" Daniel asked.

"Linden tree," Johnny said studying it with a frown. (Conjugal love)

"I'll also take spiderflowers if that's all you've got." (Elope with me)

Johnny turned around holding the bonsai close to his chest.

"Wait-"

"Johnny Lawrence, will you-"

"Wait."

Daniel huffed, he was trying to be romantic here. He'd started to sink down to the ground but stopped. He needed full attention for this and Johnny wasn't giving him that. This deserved focus.

He usually got that focus, but Johnny was holding up his hand.

Johnny put the tree down on the counter digging around in the drawers.

"What is it, someone else? Are you mad because I told Chozen that maybe in another life he'd have a shot? But otherwise he's got to wait till I die? I'm not dying you know. I'm just trying to-"

"I wanted to leave but Mr. Miyagi came by and told me he thought we were going to get swamped. Asked me to stay here because he might need my help next door. But it's been dead. Eerily so. Not a single customer. So quiet. Which means he knew. Which means he told my regulars not to come. He can be sneaky you know? Which means...aha," Johnny said placing a box down on the counter.

He'd be first damn it.

That spark of competition rearing it's head.

"Johnny Lawrence will you marry me?" Daniel said quickly.

Johnny looked at him with a warm amused look. "Only if you marry me."

"Isn't that the whole..." Daniel sighed. "One of us is going to have to say yes."

Johnny leaned over the counter towards him kissing him. "Of course it's a yes."

"How did you know?"

"Jimmy called me, then Tommy. What about you?"

"Tommy called me first."

"Do you seriously want that bouquet?" Johnny asked.

"I want the meaning behind it," Daniel said walking around the counter and wrapping his arms around Johnny, kissing him again.

Daniel pulled away brushed off the counter and hopped up onto it, sitting and taking Johnny's left hand in his.

He watched Johnny work through all the meaning in his request.

"I used the Victorian guide," Daniel said. "The floriography book."

That had been a shock to Daniel.

That there were different books, different languages of flowers.

Chozen had gotten Johnny one on Hanakotoba, Japanese meanings.

That'd been a trip.

It'd been one of the gifts he'd given Johnny when Johnny agreed to help teach at the dojo.

Chozen didn't give up that was for sure. He'd worked on that for years. Daniel stopped by frequently at the start. Worried that something bad would happen but then realized with all the kids, Sato, and his cousin around Chozen couldn't really make any advances.

He actually really needed Johnny's help. And they worked well together with the kids. Though Daniel wasn't always happy to show up and find out the kids thought Chozen and Johnny were together.

Much to his later embarrassment he had gotten into an argument with a tween who called him a homewrecker and Daniel had to explain that Johnny lived with him not Chozen. That Johnny and Daniel loved each other and if anyone was a homewrecker or had the potential for it it was Chozen.

Louie had been there still wouldn't let him live it down.

He picked up the box with the engagement ring, and slid it onto Johnny's finger.

It'd taken so damn long.

He'd had that box in his desk for years. Waiting. And now it was there. On Johnny's finger where it belonged.

It was comforting, anchoring.

"Do you have any green carnations and dill?" Daniel asked, admiring the way the ring on Johnny's finger looked in the light.

Johnny laughed. "I do, but for your dictionary that's pretty forward."

"Lustful homosexual," Daniel said with a grin. "I think that's just a normal day."

Sometimes Daniel liked going through the Victorian dictionary because some of the options were fun. Sometimes it made him want to send Chozen a bouquet of Basil, Birdsfoot Trefoil, and Dame's Rocket. He'd never known that flowers could say 'I hate you, I will get my revenge, rival.'

But he didn't hate Chozen. Not really. Not any more.

But rival still fit.

"Do you like it Tesoro?" Daniel asked, running his thumb over the ring.

He'd spent weeks trying to find one that seemed like it fit. Something that Johnny would like. He kept getting distracted by actual wedding rings instead of the engagement ones. Kept looking at how gaudy some of them felt.

He wanted something pretty but simple and not likely to get dirt stuck in it. Because Johnny was always messing with dirt. Helping Mr. Miyagi at the bonsai shop next door. Or in their yard, or cleaning and fixing things.

Pretty, easy to clean, and it had to seem like something Johnny would wear.

He maybe had set the bar too high. Which is why he'd enlisted help. Throwing jewelers off as he pulled Bobby, Dutch, Jimmy and Tommy into store after store after store, asking them their opinions on ring after ring.

They had so many opinions. He thought they, as a group, were probably annoying to the jewelers.

But the guys talked about what rings were cool. What rings were too much.

"Get him the biggest rock you can find," Dutch said leaning over the glass looking at rings.

"I know for sure that's a no," Daniel had said. "Apparently they ruin sweaters."

"What sweaters does he care that much about? You guys live in California. Don't you wear his sweaters more then him?"

Daniel stepped back thoughtfully. Johnny had talked about Laura ruining a sweater. But he was a Californian. Sweaters weren't part of the usual dress in the Valley.

"Well we do go to the mountains at least once a year," Tommy said. "We all wear sweaters there."

“It’s not like those are sentimental though. I mean you can just buy a new one at the gift shop at the main lodge,” Jimmy said.

“What about those sweaters Nonnia made?” Bobby asked.

That was it.

He didn’t want to possibly ruin that handmade sweater.

“So no big rock so he doesn’t accidentally destroy Nonnia’s welcome to the family homemade sweater,” Dutch said looking at the rings. “I mean that’s fine. What kind of stone is he interested in?”

“He…said he liked the class ring rocks.”

Dutch burst out laughing. “Then just exchange class rings. Save yourself some dough.”

“I didn’t get one,” Daniel said.

“What? Why not?”

“Do you know how expensive those things are? Also they sent out the paperwork for them when you guys were still beating me up on the regular. Why would I want to ask my mom to buy me a school ring, which ridiculous as it is, for a school where I was tormented all the time?”

“Fair point,” Bobby said.

“Like you guys it makes sense, you went there for four years, had the whole school pride shit. You made friends and were in sports and clubs. But I didn’t like school until the last semester,” Daniel said walking over to the next case, away from the diamonds Johnny didn’t seem to like. “But if we had been dating at the time, if I had been able to afford one of those rings you can believe I would’ve traded rings with him like on the first date.”

“That’s the height of high school romance,” Jimmy said with a laugh.

“That and prom.”

“Was a bit busy trying to get him to notice me.”

“Oh believe me, he noticed you,” Dutch said.

“I was thinking of a sapphire,” Daniel said looking closer at the rings.

“Or an emerald. He said he liked blue and green.”

“This is also the guy who told you he liked the class rings,” Tommy said with a laugh.

“I don’t see any here that are his style,” Bobby said with a frown.

“That’s what I thought,” Daniel said with a sigh.

“Well there’s what? Fifty more of these shops?”

“Hundreds,” Jimmy said. “Actually, I have an idea.”

“Well spill,” Dutch said as they followed him out of the shop.

“Johnny went ring shopping with me and Jenny for our wedding. I mean we got bands, and not the engagement one, but I remember the shops he liked.”

“Why didn’t you lead with that?” Daniel asked.

“Because I thought you had ones you liked, but after ten shops I see you’re just sort of lost.”

“Yeah I’m lost. All I know for certain is that he doesn’t want a diamond. If I wasn’t lost I wouldn’t have brought all of you in.”

“And here I thought it was just because you loved us and missed us and wanted to spend some time and have us be a part of this process,” Dutch said, arm around Daniel’s shoulder.

“I-“ Daniel sighed as they headed to Dutch’s van. “I do, but…fine. Normally I think I’ve got the romantic stuff down. Like easy peasy. However. This whole process has made me wonder…or question… myself. You guys know Johnny best. You spent like 6 months trying to help him get a date with me. So, if the roles were switched, if you were helping me…be as romantic as possible and get that across to Johnny…How’d you go about it?”

“I’m not sure we could top you on romantic gestures,” Tommy said. “I mean you’ve been doing so much. The Firebird for one.”

“The guitar, magic kit, surfboard.” Dutch added as he drove.

“He fucking loves that book light you got him,” Bobby said.

“Maybe build him a reading nook or library in that house of yours?”

Jimmy said.

“That is a good idea,” Daniel said.

“Don’t sound so surprised. You guys slept in the same bed for the first time because of me,” Jimmy said.

“Take him on more trips,” Dutch said.

“More trips?”

“The guy…likes dates. Right? Like I don’t know, as a fellow super lonely kid…with a lonely home…he likes just spending time with people. Like that’s why he’s always volunteering to help people. Or at least why I think he does. It’s why he like comes to hang out with us all the time. Do some karate with him more often, if you’re feeling up to it.”

“Dutch is right. Johnny just really likes spending time with you,” Bobby said.

“But I want to keep doing big romantic gestures. And I’m stuck. Like I know I can’t ask him now, but how do I ask him later?”

Tommy turned towards Daniel, looking back at him, sitting in the backseat by himself.

“Daniel, Johnny won’t be able to handle a big deal engagement. Some people love that stuff. My aunt and uncle had a big engagement in front of a lot of people. Like the pop the question thing in front of a crowd where people applaud. But Johnny…he’s still learning to like himself. If you want him to ask you, then he will pull out all the stops. But I think if you want to ask him…maybe just get him flowers.”

“Get him flowers?” Daniel repeated with a frown.

“Listen. The guy gives flowers to everyone, but rarely gets them himself right? Like he made for Ali the most ornate bouquets every Valentine’s Day and I’ve seen the flowers in your apartments and home. Hell the flowers he got us when we graduated were stunning. But no one every returns that feeling. Not on the same level you know?” Tommy said.

“Tommy, did anyone ever tell you you’re a genius?” Daniel asked.

Tommy grinned. “Not recently no.”

It'd been the second shop they'd gone into from Jimmy's list of places Johnny had taken him and Jenny where Daniel had found the ring. Gold with emeralds, all twisted up to look like leaves. There were some diamonds because apparently everything had those, but they were small and not likely to get caught on anything.

He'd found a few that he'd liked, but that's the one that felt right. He'd just wanted to get Laura's opinion before he made the purchase and she'd smiled, ruffled his hair and said, "You're the one who wants to marry him. What one do you see helping you facilitate that question?"

A stamp of approval mixed with a non-answer.

Daniel had been elated and also frustrated.

But it looked perfect on Johnny's finger. He'd borrowed Johnny's high school graduation ring to get the ring size. It'd been a lot of work, and nerve wracking but he loved looking at it.

He kept it in the office after, he worried not that Johnny would find it, since he didn't snoop but that Louie would, or his ma. He loved them both, but LaRusso's talked a mile a minute and the possibility of accidentally letting it slip was too high.

"I do, I love it. Do you want to see yours?" Johnny asked.

Daniel laughed and held out his left hand. "Yes."

Johnny handed him the box. "Do you remember that time in Newark where your grandparents, mom and I went to New York City?"

"Yeah, there was some flower thing."

"The Macy's flower show," Johnny said.

"Right that. What about it?"

"Well the first year we went your grandparents asked me point blank if I wanted to marry you."

Johnny's face was a little pink and Daniel could only imagine. Johnny nervous being asked to go do something he wanted to do but hadn't been able to ask. But Daniel's grandparents wanted to make him feel included. And then finding out it was also an excuse, jut to be asked where he saw the relationship going. Johnny had probably turned as

red as one of the roses on display.

That had been so long ago.

Daniel remembered offering to go with but his mother told him that Johnny watched over the baby LaRusso cousins so much he deserved a day off.

And Daniel remembered agreeing, but then when he got elbow deep in macaroni art and glitter did he remember there were a ton of other adult LaRusso's not helping out that could've chipped in and it didn't have to be exclusively either Daniel or Johnny on babysitting duty.

He remembered being so pissed about it.

He'd wanted to go see the flowers with Johnny, to hear what Johnny thought of them, to point at something pretty and for Johnny to tell him exactly what it was.

"I said, as soon as I could legally I wanted to ask you. And they hadn't understood that exactly, so I explained that it wasn't taxes, not really, but the ability to be by your side for that very specific part of the marriage vows. In sickness and health. The good times and bad. Legally I can't—couldn't."

Johnny tapped the box with his index finger. "I can get you something else if you don't like this."

"Can I open it?" Daniel asked looking at him amused.

"Yes, of course."

Daniel flipped open the box.

He looked up at Johnny eyes wide.

Johnny carefully removed the ring from the box.

"So I was told that when your grandparents left Italy there wasn't a lot they could bring with them. They had to be very careful of what they brought and they didn't have a ton of money. Just enough to get to Newark. But this, apparently is the LaRusso ring. Passed down from generation to generation. And I asked if they were sure, because I could buy you a ring and you've got so many cousins. But they were very very adamant.

“It was supposed to go to your father, but apparently he beat them to it. Asking your mother to marry him before they got a chance to give it to him to give her. So either way, eventually, it was supposed to be yours. And so they gave me the honor of getting to give it to you, along with a promise to stay by your side through all the good times and the bad, in sickness and in health, if you’ll have me.”

Daniel held out his hand, it trembled more than he’d expected. He remembered that ring, he remembered the stories. He remembered sitting next to his Nonnia and Nonno as they told the story over and over and over again.

He couldn’t believe they’d given it to Johnny for him.

Johnny reached up and cupped the sides of his face, scooting his chair in closer and rubbing his thumbs over Daniel’s cheeks.

“I already asked you,” Daniel said. “I asked you first.”

Johnny laughed softly, kissing him. “And I love it. And I’m hoping these are happy tears, or else I’m more than happy to get you something more modern if you’d like.”

“No, this is perfect. I’m just surprised,” Daniel said with a sniff.

Johnny wrapped his arms around Daniel’s waist and pulled him off the counter and onto his lap kissing his tear stained cheeks.

Daniel rolled around feeling for Johnny but he wasn't there. He pushed himself up grumpily looking around their hotel room. That had been some of his best work. Or at least he thought so. And it'd sounded like it. Maybe he was in the bathroom. Nope, no light on.

He kept looking.

Johnny was sitting on the balcony in a hotel robe.

Daniel laid on his side.

Johnny.

His Tesoro.

Sitting outside on the balcony in the hotel robe that if he was a betting man he bet was barely tied.

How he'd gotten up Daniel didn't know. He'd expected, he'd thought he'd done such a good job that Johnny would sleep through their plans in the morning, or ask to in that sleepy raspy voice he got that Daniel could never refuse, to postpone their plans.

Johnny was going to hate him.

He couldn't stop thinking about it.

Johnny was going to be pissed.

Ma was going to be pissed.

He'd been trying to think of how to bring it up and he hadn't wanted to ruin the festivities, but now he feared that he'd ruin their trip if he didn't say anything.

Now he supposed was better than never.

He looked around for something to wear, grabbing Johnny's shirt off the ground— ah right, he'd ripped this one off, buttons were gone.

He sighed, well he could ask the front desk for a sewing kit and fix it later.

If he could find all the buttons.

There had to be another robe.

Where had Johnny found that one?

Closet?

Aha, fluffy white robe.

Nice.

He carefully tied the sash and stuck on a pair of slippers and walked to the balcony pushing the door open and listening to the sounds of the city.

"Hey," Daniel said putting his hands on Johnny’s shoulders and sliding them down Johnny's chest. "What are you up to out here by yourself? Post cards?"

"Yeah, I thought it'd be good to get started."

Daniel picked one up.

"Seriously? Chozen?"

"He's babysitting our bonsai and running the dojo by himself which means dealing with Louie and he's helping Mr. Miyagi. That deserves a post card at least."

Daniel sighed setting it back down.

"There's something I've been meaning to tell you and you're going to hate me," Daniel said.

"Never."

Daniel slumped in the other chair looking out at the city lights.

"I've been thinking about this for a while, and I think I made a mistake, and it means I wasted all this time and you're going to be pissed."

Johnny's eyes widened a little, every so slightly, a look of panic.

"What's it about?" he asked. "What's it effect?"

"Everything."

"Rip the band-aid off."

"I don't know how to," Daniel groaned scrubbing at his face with his hands. "I wanted to tell you before but I didn't want to ruin things and well now I don't want to ruin the trip and I fear I won't stop thinking about it and I gotta tell you so—"

"Daniel."

Right.

He heard himself.

He was spiraling and he was one wrong step from taking Johnny with him.

He reached out taking Johnny's hand in his.

"I love you very much."

"Daniel."

"I've been trying to think about what I want out of life. I've got a nice house, a hot husband, who I realize I'm freaking out—"

He took a deep breath.

He'd just come out and say it and then he'd explain everything.

"I don't want to work at the dealership any more."

Johnny blinked. He pulled his hand out of Daniel's and Daniel frowned. Johnny grabbed the side of his chair and pulled him closer.

"Okay," Johnny said slowly, hooking his leg around Daniel's and holding out his hand. "Why would I hate you for that?"

Daniel took the hand again and held it tight. He took another deep breath.

"Let me explain the whole thing. I...you saw Ma's car right? The one that got us all the way here? I got so embarrassed with that thing. Ma drove me to dates in that thing and we had to get out and push and it was just...not how you want a date to go. But she couldn't afford a new car or a nicer one. And you...you lived in your families car. You and your mom. I'd never thought that sometimes people live in their cars. That that becomes their home and that's all they've got. It made me look at cars differently and I got so much joy out of working on cars with Mr. Miyagi. I wanted to combine all of that.

“I wanted to get this job where I could fix cars on the cheap for people who needed it, while also figuring out how to give people the best deals so that people who couldn't normally afford a car could. To help give them that joy of a first car. I wanted, if I couldn't help people get homes, to make sure they at least got the best shot at a comfortable car. And then I made that dream happen fast. Like it only took a year after college to get that dealership set up and not long for it to be successful. And I've got a home, a hot husband and a dealership. But I sat in my dealership and felt the same way I did in business school and at my apprenticeship. I like the people, I like my staff, I like what I do. But I don't want to be there. Maybe it's the grass is greener. But I don't see myself being happy there long term. Not alone."

Daniel looked up at Johnny, he wasn't sure what look he'd been expecting, but it wasn't the look he recognized.

The look he'd seen a thousand times of Johnny actively listening to him.

Not mad. Not pissed. He'd expected that, both, for Johnny to be upset and unhappy.

He wavered.

"I think if I wasn't alone at the dealership that'd be fine. But I miss being with you. I miss the smell of the dirt and soil. When I get home and you haven't showered yet and still smell like the shop, like flowers, I want to bottle that up. I don't want to sell LaRusso Auto, but I don't want to go into the office any more. I'm planning to step back. I still want to cut prices and give people what they want...but I don't think office life is for me."

"I thought part of the reason you left was because you couldn't handle being next to me at Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees."

Daniel gently rubbed his thumbs over the back of Johnny's hand. He reached out and took Johnny's left hand and kissed his ring finger, that ring he'd agonized over for months picking out that he held onto for years, waiting, half tempted to cave and just give it to him before anything could happen. The wedding band that matched his that they'd picked out together.

"Well that's why it's not Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees, and it's not helping you at the flower shop."

Johnny leaned forward kissing him gently. "You can do anything you want. You can come and go as often as you please and it won't bother me. You can go to college again, pick another degree to pursue, you can change your mind a thousand times, all I need is you."

"You don't mind? Me leaving another business? After everything? After betting on me?"

"Not at all."

Daniel felt the tension in his shoulders release and pressed his forehead against Johnny's hand that he held in his own.

"I just...It feels so irresponsible to create these places and keep leaving them. And it's not like I want to go back to Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees."

"So what happens now?"

“You know all the photos I’ve been taking?”

“The scrapbooks?”

Daniel laughed softly. “Yes and no. I’ve actually been working with Tommy’s aunt, and those contacts we made in Okinawa. Apparently I’m pretty good at taking pictures, and there’s more flexibility in my schedule with photography. I’d be out, moving around. And I think I need that. I don’t think I can stay cooped up inside sitting at a desk or in conferences all the time.”

“Isn’t patience and being still part of taking a photo? The right photo? Let alone when you develop it?”

“Yes, but I can be patient and still when I’ve got a goal in mind. But this will free my schedule up a bit. I can help Mr. Miyagi in the shop if I want to, or I can swing by one of the dojo’s and train with you or watch you train or I can help out at the flower shop.”

“Is this because of those weeks were your staff got food poisoning and I came in and worked the front desk?”

“You were the hottest secretary I ever had on payroll.”

“And one big HR violation.”

“More than one,” Daniel said with a grin.

It’d been fun to have Johnny at LaRusso Auto. Putting him in a nice snug fitting suit, watching him help the mechanics team, or walking around the floor talking to customers.

He was good at it. And if Johnny had wanted to work there he’d have hired him in a heartbeat.

He looked good in the lighting and out on the lot. He sold a lot of cars, he made a lot of repairs.

He even fixed things that his repair guy hadn’t been able to get to yet.

But he was also so distracting. Daniel couldn’t take his eyes off of him. He’d spot Johnny out of his peripheral and he’d want to go over and talk to him, to put his arms around Johnny and hold his hand.

He wanted to be a part of the conversations Johnny was having.

Louie, one of the few on his team who hadn’t gotten food poisoning

because he'd been at the dojo instead, had to keep slapping Daniel's shoulder, joining his conversations and redirecting the focus back to work.

You're going to lose customers cuz. You're practically drooling. Focus.

And he did.

He'd focus until Johnny dropped something and would go to pick it up and then he was lost again until he reached a boiling point and during a break or during lunch he'd invite Johnny into his office to make out like horny teenagers. And often, more.

He thought he'd matured. He thought he'd gotten a better handle on things, but after a couple weeks of staying late to go over paperwork only to end up either on the floor under his desk in a tangle of sweaty limbs or with Johnny on his desk he realized there really was a reason he left Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees. And no matter how much he missed it it would take months at best to get it all out of his system.

But he did feel like he owed Johnny sometime at the flower shop. Because Johnny always worked for him, always helped when he needed it. And every time it came time to pay Johnny he'd ask to be paid in kisses.

Ridiculous.

Loveable.

Daniel was so deep in debt.

"So the plan is that I step back. Louie can run the place now. He's got the degrees, I've taught him everything I know. Which I can't believe. I can't believe he's mature enough to take care of the LaRusso Auto on his own now."

"I would not have agreed with you if it was when I first met him," Johnny said. "But Chozen's really worked so damn hard on getting Louie to focus and be responsible."

Daniel sighed getting out of his chair and moving to sit on Johnny's lap.

"I never thought I'd be grateful to Chozen. Okay yes, I see the look, beyond the initial comes to the Valley and gets rid of Cobra Kai and getting Miyagi-do up and running."

"You do know he wants Louie to lead one of the other branches right?" Johnny said. "Like you might have to fight Chozen for Louie."

Daniel laughed. "That's a thought huh? How time intensive is it? Really? Running your own dojo? Huh Sensei Lawrence?" Daniel hooked an arm around Johnny's shoulders, leaning in close.

"Chozen puts his all into it."

"Yeah. I know. And I know you've put a lot of hours into it too, Mr. co-sensei," Daniel said trailing his hand down Johnny's chest pushing the side of the robe open. "Ah, they seem a little swollen still."

"Yeah well whose fault is that?"

Daniel brushed his thumb over Johnny's nipple and felt the tremor run through him.

"There is something else I do appreciate Chozen for."

"What?" Johnny asked looking amused.

"He got you in your gi again. And he picked arguably the best cut of a gi for you."

"How so?"

"It shows your arms, and sometimes when your sparring there's just a little bit of this," Daniel said swiping his thumb.

Johnny shivered.

"A bonus is if there's time in my schedule, since it's flexible, I could come watch you teach, in your gi, and watch the beautiful little game of peekaboo that happens."

"Well now I know why Chozen won't let you spar with me as an example to the class anymore. I didn't realize you were ogling me the whole time."

"It's a good thing parents aren't allowed to stay and watch."

"Maybe you shouldn't be allowed to stay and watch. I'm not just a piece of meat," Johnny said.

"I know," Daniel said. "Can I kiss you now?"

"Yeah," Johnny said leaning forward and kissing him.

"Why'd you pick sitting out here all scantly clad?" Daniel asked. "You couldn't sleep?"

Johnny looked past him at the cramped buildings and the mountains in the distance lit up in lights. "I wanted to enjoy being here and to think."

"Yeah, happy with your choice?"

Johnny smiled at him. "Very happy," he said kissing Daniel's nose and wrapping his arms around Daniel's waist. "You?"

"Delighted. Ready to have cake for breakfast?"

"Seriously?"

"Oh so serious. Chocolate tarts for breakfast."

Johnny laughed softly.

Daniel kissed him again, running his warm hand under the side of the robe, rolling his thumb over Johnny's nipple again.

Johnny moaned into the kiss, hands tight on Daniel's waist.

"Still sensitive?" Daniel asked innocently pulling away.

"It's been only like a half hour."

"That's it?"

"Yes. How you oscillate so quickly from crisis to horny is...a real gift."

Daniel grinned. "Maybe I should get my poor dear husband some ice huh? Think that will help? Or maybe you need a distraction?" Daniel asked hand running down Johnny's abdomen, letting Johnny's robe fallen open as he did so. He carefully pressed a foot against Johnny's thigh, nudging it aside and away from him. "I bet it'd be even easier now."

"What?" Johnny asked looking at him amused, lifting up his leg so it was propped up on the other chair.

"Well you're awake, I'm awake, we're supposed to stay up for at least, what, another hour or two so the jet lag isn't that bad. And I already

did all the prepping earlier. You said what it'd only been a half hour? I bet, you're still...prepared."

"Why are you saying it like that? Are you seriously suggesting that we spend what? 2 more hours doing this? Do you realize how many times we already—"

"Hey we've got records to beat. Couple of champions like us."

Johnny snorted a laugh rolling his eyes and Daniel kissed along his jaw, pushing him back a little and sliding a finger inside. Easy.

"See?" he asked, adding another. "I bet I could slide right in."

"I've already...taken 2 baths. I don't want to take a third."

"I'll help," Daniel said, curling three fingers in a way that made Johnny's chest arch in the dim light.

"You'll help?" Johnny repeated liked he'd heard a joke.

"I worked very hard earlier, and budgeted for a lot more kissing this evening. Besides, you're already interested," Daniel said gently poking Johnny's dick.

"It's your fault if we miss our tour tomorrow," Johnny said, leaning forward to kiss him. “Plus we’re supposed to visit your cousins and great aunts and uncles and family”

"Yes yes and I'll fix your shirt," Daniel said sliding off of Johnny's lap. "So how about we move this somewhere a little easier? Maybe the table?"

"I'm not having sex over the postcards."

"I feel like we should. I mean isn't it the whole point of a honeymoon? Isn't it what everyone knows a honeymoon is? I mean you know that essentially it's a vacation to have a whole bunch of sex. Right? It's literally a vacation celebrating the party you had for saying you like someone."

Johnny frowned.

"No."

"No? Johnny."

"It's not like, it's love Daniel. There's a difference. I like corn nuts, I like muscle cars and I like reading, I like flowers, but I love you. The difference between those levels is vast, the gap is huge. Marriage isn't a light thing."

"I know and I love you," he said kissing Johnny's cheek and reaching out to take Johnny's hand in his again. "And I know you want to go sightseeing, you want to go to Pompeii and look around. I mean I do too. I want to go around and see everything with you. But I also want to enjoy every second I can consummating this marriage."

"You're going to use that phrase as often as you can huh?"

"Yes."

Married.

It'd been a whirlwind after he'd asked Johnny and Johnny had asked him. Cake tasting, though Johnny liked the coconut caramel cake Daniel had had in mind all along, outfit fittings, location choices, picking a date, sending out invites. There were so many little tiny details that Daniel hadn't been aware of that Johnny knew. Like napkins and cutlery and having to pick all of that. Little tiny details.

Daniel thought Johnny wouldn't have cared. That he would've gotten frustrated after looking at the fifteenth cream colored napkin, but he didn't.

He actually spent time and care on every step of the way. And he worked with Daniel's schedule, bringing him things to look at and discuss over lunch at the dealership.

It was heartwarming to watch him open up the booklets and discuss patterns and colors and themes. He looked…so happy. Possibly happier then when he'd designed and opened the flower shop.

A lot of it had been easy. They had already done a lot of deciding what colors and patterns and fabrics they liked when setting up their house. They'd both already thought about weddings, specifically their wedding.

They knew who they were inviting and where they'd all sit.

The hardest part was their party. Who was best man for who?

They kept trying to divvy up their friends. Who'd stand on which side, who'd be in charge of something or other for who.

And it just didn't work.

Bobby was easy. He wanted to officiate. Threatened to battle any other person they thought of having that spot.

But everyone else…not easy.

After deciding maybe to write everyone's name on Popsicle sticks and draw them randomly they looked at one another, at the seriousness of the situation and burst out laughing. They ended up laying side by side in the garden looking at clouds passing overhead.

"Who'd have guessed this would be the hardest part?"

"I feel like a divorced parent."

"I don't think we can ask them to choose either."

"Oh hell no, if they don't all pick me then my feelings will be hurt."

Johnny had laughed and Daniel had rolled over towards him, there was a nice breeze. "I'd also be upset if they didn't all pick you," he said leaning down to kiss Johnny. "So, what can we do?"

Johnny frowned thoughtfully, moving to pull Daniel down into his arms. "Do you want a bachelors party?"

"Not really. I'd rather an engagement party," Daniel said. "How about you?"

"I feel like I already got to do that with the guys for Jimmy's wedding."

"Yeah."

"Do you think we could just make…one party?"

"Like they're all together rather than on one side or another?"

"I like it."

"So then we just got to tell them to divide responsibilities themselves."

"Maybe we could put Bobby in charge of them. He still has that

booklet of stickers right?"

"Yeah. He does. So Bobby's in charge of Tommy, Jimmy, Dutch, Louie, Kumiko and Jessica?"

"Yup."

"That means being in charge of paying the staff at the end of the night, rings, getting us to where we need to be when we need to be there."

"I think they can handle all of that. I mean they did spend 6 months trying to get us together."

"And failing. Mr. Miyagi's the one who truly got us together."

"Or you and a storm got us together," Daniel said kissing his nose. "Sure you don't want to just elope?"

Johnny had frowned, rolling them over, "No. I don't want to run away with you. I want to stay. I want to tell everyone we know and love that I love you the best. Plus I'm pretty sure our friends and family would be pissed. The guys have been invested, I mean Tommy and Jimmy worked very hard to get this to happen."

Daniel knew Johnny was right.

The guys had always had their back. And Tommy and Jimmy had worked tirelessly to make sure Johnny and Daniel could get married.

He knew his grandparents would be upset if there wasn't a big wedding, his mother, Laura, their friends would all be upset.

But he liked the idea of just whisking Johnny away to some small place in the middle of nowhere, signing the documents, kissing and then finding some nice hotel to honeymoon in for like a month. He liked the idea of doing it ASAP. Before anything got in the way, before someone higher up in government thought wait a second what's this?

The way Johnny looked at him, so fiercely determined that it would happen, that it didn't need to be rushed, that they could take their time, it was trust. Trust that Daniel wasn't going anywhere, that when the guys told them they had the green light that it wouldn't disappear, that they deserved to celebrate years, decades together.

That he truly wanted to unabashedly tell everyone they knew, who

was probably sick of hearing it, that he loved Daniel.

It was overwhelming in the best way. And maybe it took them longer than expected to make decisions because they kept having moments, like that one in the garden, where they made a decision and then got caught up in the moment, in each other. In a hurry to get out of clothes and to touch and kiss and be together. To wrap his arms and legs around Johnny in the garden and to enjoy the heat of his gaze and the feel of him. Enjoying the view of him above him, to touch wherever he wanted, happy they didn't have neighbors, that Johnny had designed the garden for extra privacy.

The engagement party had been fun, the guys didn't complain too much about the lack of a party of debauchery, the girls were more bummed then the guys were, except Louie.

Louie was pretty disappointed. So he'd gone with Jessica, Jenny, Kumiko, and Ali out only to return covered in glitter and saying he hadn't known what he'd expected but it hadn't been that. And he refused to tell Daniel where they'd gone.

He wasn't upset, or scarred, he seemed fine just still processing something.

The worst part of it was they were very adamant that Johnny and Daniel couldn't sleep together or see each other before the wedding. Some arbitrary 24 hour rule.

Daniel got the whale shark.

Johnny got the guys. Mostly, apparently, because Daniel complained about sharing a bed with them and Johnny didn't. Not as much anyway. And also because Daniel had protested that Johnny didn't sleep well by himself and Dutch had patted his shoulders and said, "Then we'll stay with him."

His plan had backfired. He'd wanted to spend time with Johnny before the wedding. To tease him about sex before marriage and being naughty and how tomorrow they'd be married and watching Johnny's face to run red, and his neck, and his ears and ask him if he knew that the honeymoon was this but more. If he was ready for their sex vacation.

But instead he found himself hanging out with Mr. Miyagi. It soothed the frustration he felt, spending part of his night playing cards with his family, with Mr. Miyagi, Yukie, and Sato.

He expected to be bored his final 24 hours unmarried. But to his surprise he spent most of it crying.

Not because he wasn't excited, or because he was getting cold feet. But because everyone kept coming to sit with him and have heart to hearts.

Ali who held his hands at the fancy hotel courtyard by the fountain talking about the past and how proud she was of him growing as a person, reminiscing. He'd talked with Kumiko, Louie, the guys, hell they had to sit down with Bobby a couple of times leading up to the wedding to talk about their relationship and the future.

Daniel might've made the entire process a little more uncomfortable by telling Bobby they had a plenty adventurous sex life and learned that the ruby glass container they used to keep ideas, was worth a small fortune. And he might've scandalized Johnny by letting Bobby look in the jar and read a few that were maybe a bit more detailed because Daniel had gotten bored at work and maybe added a few extra explicit things to the jar.

But it was really sitting with his mom and his Nonnio and Nonnia the night before the wedding that had knocked the air from his lungs. The fact that instead of four there should have been five of them. The way his mom had hugged him, the quiet, "He'd be so happy for you. He'd have loved Johnny you know? Loved how the two of you are together. Supportive and loving."

The way his grandparents held his hands and Nonnio had said with his voice cracking, "He wanted to be there for everything you know? Learning to drive, first date, first breakup, first job, all the good times and the bad. He loved you very much and he tried so hard to stay around as long as he could. But, all he wanted was what any parent wants, for you to be happy. And you are, right?"

"With Johnny? Very," Daniel had said brushing tears from his eyes.

"He loved weddings. And he'd love this one. All the hard work you two put in. All the people who came to see you. Like that girl and that woman that I thought you hated."

"I don't hate them!" Daniel said. "I just…she spent the summer one year and said she was Mr. Miyagi's best student and thus his favorite because he took her to prom and we started arguing about how I knew all of Mr. Miyagi's teachings and she said she did. And we sparred and it was like almost even. Like frustratingly even because apparently

she'd been studying since she was little without realizing it and then she wanted to spar against Johnny, but then ended up teaching us something we didn't know."

"You didn't tell your grandparents this one?" his mom asked with a giggle.

"No, he didn't. So what special skill did she know that you two hadn't? I thought you both knew all of Mr. Miyagi's lessons?" Nonnia asked.

Daniel rubbed his face and sighed leaning back in his chair. "She tricked us. I mean she didn't know we were together, but she led us through this sparing style and then burst out giggling because it was the karate version of a waltz. And Mr. Miyagi came home right at that time and he laughed and said she'd become a good sensei too."

"So if you're annoyed with her then why'd you invite her?"

"She's like a little sister. Ever since Mr. Miyagi went to Boston, she's like my karate sibling. And she's got like the same bad luck as me and Johnny said she's just as stubborn and hot headed. She kind of reminds me of Louie, like when he first came to LA, or me. I don't hate her. And her grandma is nice. Plus like we kind of got our revenge. Twice. Once Johnny realized we were dancing, we actually started dancing. And she wasn't expecting that. And it was a lot of fun because Julie had started playing music. It was just nice to dance in Mr. Miyagi's garden, we hadn't done that in a while. And he kissed me and she was so shocked that it was delightful. And then we drove her to the dojo where she learned that she doesn't know all of the Miyagi secret fighting and it was just kind of fun to see her annoy Chozen."

When his grandparents had gone to bed he'd gone to spend time with Mr. Miyagi because he and Sato were still up drinking. Chatting away and laughing. Sato threw an arm around him as soon as he got close, pulling him to sit with them, grabbing a glass from nearby and passing it to Daniel, filling it up.

"Congratulations. Tomorrow, married."

"Yes, oh, thank you."

"Long over due step."

Daniel laughed softly. "Very."

Sato held out his glass and Mr. Miyagi held out his. “Italian cheers?”

“Cin Cin” Daniel said tapping their glasses.

“Cin Cin,” Mr. Miyagi and Sato said.

“Nariyoshi-san go to Italy,” Sato said. “Remember Cin Cin?”

“Not many Cin Cin with US military. Miyagi with Japanese and Americans. Say Kanpai or Cheers.”

Sato nodded, patting Daniel’s back a little drunkenly. “Daniel-san, love…precious. Like living thing. Like Nariyoshi-sans trees. Must be cared for. Like tree need nutrients and attention. Unlike tree…need communication. Right, Nariyoshi-san?”

“Hai. Miyagi hope Johnny-san and Daniel-san’s love live long time. Like old old tree. Growing, changing, but together. Miyagi know…big events, life events, miss father. But hope Daniel-san know, not alone. Sometimes Daniel-san make Miyagi feel like,” Mr. Miyagi said something in Okinawan and Sato nodded.

“I didn’t quite catch that,” Daniel said softly. It wasn’t the Japanese he’d studied or the bits of Okinawan he knew.

“Nariyoshi-san thinks of you, like son. Feels honored. Dear friend, cannot replace Daniel-san’s father, like Daniel-san cannot replace Nariyoshi-san’s son. But…hmmm…watching Johnny-san and Daniel-san learn and grow and become…”

“Men. Good men,” Mr. Miyagi said patting Daniel’s shoulder. “Miyagi very proud of Daniel-san.”

Mr. Miyagi’s eyes had been glassy, teary and Daniel’s had too. His throat scratchy as he sniffed and took another drink. He learned to cheers in Okinawan “Karii, and taught them the wedding cheers in Italian Per Cent’anni.”

Sleeping alone had been weird. The drinking had been helpful. All the tears had exhausted him. Sitting with those two and talking and crying. Louie eventually found him and shoo’d him off to bed, though he sat and chatted with Daniel for a bit.

Confused, actually seriously confused at how Chozen seemed vastly uncomfortable surrounded by so many LaRussos which had left Daniel grinning and laughing unable to explain it to Louie before he fell fast

asleep.

Only to be woken up by the guys bursting into his room and bouncing on his bed like toddlers.

He'd been free from them for one glorious night, the trade off was he also hadn't had Johnny and now, suddenly he regretted sharing them as their party. If he'd just taken the girls as his best ladies he'd not have been woken up in such a manner. Muttering curses under his breath as they talked about breakfast.

Hungover, just ever so slightly in a way he wouldn't have been a decade ago, cursing age and wondering how Sato and Mr. Miyagi could handle all that drinking and still get up in the morning. Maybe Yukie knew some secret hangover cure.

"Come on Daniel. You can't be all doom and gloom today. You're getting married," Jimmy said. "It's not allowed."

"Yeah you can't back out now. Do you know how many letters I wrote? Even from Korea?" Dutch said.

"You keep mentioning letters. What letters?" Bobby asked.

"The sooner you're up and ready the sooner you get to see Johnny," Tommy said softly.

"Why is it always you four standing between us?" Daniel complained throwing his arm over his eyes to block out the light as Bobby pulled open the curtains. "I know Johnny liked Pride and Prejudice but it always feels like I'm trying to court someone whose not allowed out without four people to make sure I don't do anything untoward."

"Oooh fancy words for someone who looks mighty hungover. That bodes well for the ceremony," Jimmy said.

"Yeah I'd rather you not pass out during it," Bobby said.

"How is Johnny?" Daniel asked. "Did he sleep okay?"

The silence was disturbing and Daniel moved his arm off from over his eyes to look at them.

"Is he okay?" He asked sitting up. "Did you give him too much to drink or do something stupid?"

"Hey!" Dutch said with fake hurt, hand to his chest. "I'll have you

know Johnny didn't drink anything. We followed him around all night. He chatted with Mr. Miyagi, Sato, and Yukie. Sat with his mom by the pool for a bit. Held his Abuela's hands and listened to her. Then went to bed with a good book."

"Then why didn't you just say he's fine?"

"Well he didn't sleep super well."

"What do you mean? Was he…did he change his mind?"

"Woah," Bobby said. "No way. He just kept talking. And the quietness was whether or not we tell you."

"Well you freaked me out."

Tommy sat down next to him wrapping an arm around his shoulders and resting his head on Daniel's nearest shoulder. "He spent most of the night talking about you okay? How it was weird not having you there, talking about the last time you two spent a long time apart where you didn't even call was when he went hiking. And then Bobby talked to us about that. And how everything felt too quiet. Like he was whispering you know? The way kids do at sleepovers when it's after lights out or whatever?"

"He talked about the honeymoon you two planned. About how much it means."

"I think…" Bobby said picking up the whale shark and holding it in his lap. "You know how when you've got something excited coming up and you can't sleep?

"Yeah," Daniel said

"It was more of that."

"So, how about, we get you up, dressed and to breakfast?"

"How's that going to work?" Daniel asked.

"What do you mean?"

"There's only one place in the hotel to eat. No way to avoid seeing him and you guys have been trying so hard to make sure I don't."

"Ah, well Louie, Jessica and Kumiko grabbed Johnny for breakfast already. He's eating with his mom and Mr. Miyagi and that crew.

They've driven off to a restaurant. You, however, are eating here, and I believe all the LaRussos are ready and waiting to talk our ears off."

"Oh I'm ready for that," Dutch said with a grin.

"Chozen however was not. I saw him talking to your cousins I think and he looked so lost and overwhelmed because then an aunt started talking to him," Tommy said.

"Did you go rescue him?"

"Yeah. Learned that there's a fancy bar that around 3pm serves tea. So we disappeared to have tea. Though it was high tea, which he hadn't had before and puzzled over the tiny sandwiches for a bit. He's grateful to be off with only one LaRusso at that breakfast."

"So ready to start your day? Or you still want to lay in bed and mutter curses at us?" Jimmy asked.

"I mean you can. If that's what you'd rather do, we're pretty good at cursing right back," Dutch said with a grin.

Daniel sighed. "You're right. The sooner I'm up the sooner we can get moving, the sooner I can see Johnny, marry him, and be far far away from all of you, for two glorious weeks."

"You do realize that a honeymoon isn't just sex right?" Bobby said.

Daniel got up and headed towards the bathroom to get ready.

"Right Daniel?" Bobby called again. "It's a chance to get to spend time alone together before your future, and to talk about things. It's not just two weeks of nothing but sex."

Daniel could hear Dutch laughing.

"Ah leave the guy alone he's probably decided it's just 2 weeks of 99% sex interspersed with the occasional sightseeing," Dutch said.

"Bobby it'll be fine, they were already living together. They've got a house after all, and they've already been having sex. You don't need to give those spiels you give old fashioned couples."

Bobby sighed. "I know. Out of all the couples I've married, shut up Dutch that's how you say it, Johnny and Daniel know each other best, and have been together the longest, but I still want…I take my job seriously okay?"

“We know Pops,” Dutch said. “And I find it fun that you went from orgies to marrying multiple couples every chance you got. It’s fitting.”

Daniel heard laughter as he pushed the door open again, dressed for breakfast and ready to go. There was something comforting from them. Something pleasant about the dorky applause he received for just getting dressed.

He never could be mad at them for very long. He was glad they were there. That he had them in his life, to cheer him on for the big things and the small.

Daniel looked down at Johnny, breathing heavily. Daniel had taken the postcards and thrown them through the open door into the room before they’d started.

“You okay?”

“Yes. But that’s the last round for tonight. I still want to go to Pompeii.”

Daniel laughed softly kissing Johnny. “Time for bed.”

“Yeah if we can move.”

“We’re not that old yet.”

“Daniel, less than 48 hours ago we got married, we danced for hours and hours and hours, and then we got on a 14 hour flight to Naples because we decided we wanted to start by marking Pompeii off the to do list and because your grandparents said the food in this area is amazing. So I’m not old…well it depends on the day if I feel old, but I am tired.”

“You’re the one who got out of bed to write postcards.”

“Because I had energy to write. Now I’ve got no energy. Zero.”

“My poor *Tesoro* ,” Daniel said kissing his nose and grinning at that face Johnny made.

“Could you stop moving like that?”

“You do know one of the parts about being married is…what did Bobby say, of one mind, body, and soul?”

“I don’t think that’s meant to be literal.”

Daniel pouted, exaggerated, but carefully took Johnny’s hand in his, lacing their fingers.

“I almost can’t believe we’re here.”

“Naples?”

“Married and in Naples.”

Johnny smiled softly. “I can’t believe you’re still awake and functioning. I took breaks from dancing and you kept dancing and drinking.”

“Everyone wanted to wish us well,” Daniel said.

“Did you enjoy it?”

“The wedding or the sex?” Daniel asked with a faux bewildered look.

“The wedding.”

“I loved it. I loved the flowers. I know you made the boutonnières. Red roses for love, ivy, myrtle and…what was the other one?”

“Dahlia. It’s for commitment and eternal love.”

“I gave mine to Ma to press.”

“She came to get mine too, afterwards,” Johnny said.

“Johnny, it was beautiful. I loved everything. Even Dutch dumping out all the letters he wrote to his representatives since you told him you liked me. That was cute.”

Johnny flushed red. “I can’t believe he did that.”

It’d been a little surprising. Dutch in his suit, assisted by Jessica in the bridesmaid dress her and Kumiko had coordinated, carrying a big bag and depositing it right in front of them before giving his speech.

“Johnny told me…or I suppose we guessed, that he liked Daniel in the winter of 1985. That was of course, right off the heels of Daniel kicking his ass at the All-Valley. He asked us to leave Daniel alone and we ended up doing the opposite. Instead we tried very hard to get these two together, to see if it was even possible.

"And it was, just Johnny was stubborn in a belief that Daniel didn't like him at all and friendship was the best he could hope for and Daniel was flirting as hard as could be and just assumed Johnny was used to it because it's California and we're always hanging around Johnny.

"But I decided, because I was bored and because I needed a distraction myself from losing at the All-Valley and the awfulness that ensued to go old school. By which I mean harassing my local and federal representatives. This was actual something I started doing when I was younger. For different things.

"One of the private schools I went to talked about politics and how their purpose was to listen to the people and make decisions based off of the feedback they got. Like dumbed down version of course. But I decided that it was like one of those anonymous feedback boxes. And so I'd call whenever I was mad about something or had a question. I looked up the office phone number and would call and complain about my school lunches, about why the buttons to cross the street were so high that I couldn't reach them, yeah little little kid me. I asked why there were dog parks but not parks for other pets, I asked how old you had to be to go to space.

"At first I think they thought it was cute, but then at some point I'd hear the hello you've reached the offices of so and so how can I help you? And I'd say my little intro which I'd memorized I'm a young future constituent, which believe me took a long time to stop tripping over and they'd sigh and ask if my parents knew how much these calls cost and I said my parents didn't care. That they approved of my political engagement. Which was true. Though I also don't think they knew.

"Anyway point was. I viewed them as a hot line to air out grievances and I made a change after going home learning that Johnny had a crush on a boy and instead rung them up and said "What's got to happen so that a dude who falls in love with a dude can get married?" and hoo boy was that a long ass conversation.

"I blame Jimmy for that. Jimmy had settled on law as part of his future goals after years of being lost, and he'd hammered in during one of our classes in high school all this law stuff. So I became a pain in the ass to my local political people. I got passed around, transfered, spent hours and hours and hours on the phone arguing and essentially talking up this soap opera style romantic drama unfolding before my eyes.

“And then they hung up on me. So I started writing letters. So many fucking letters,” Dutch said opening the bag. “When they changed things. They sent them all back. I think as a please for the love of god leave us the fuck alone. I like to think I wore them down.”

Dutch fished out a letter, carefully opening it and moving the microphone he was holding.

“Dear political ass hat, ah I was drunk when I wrote this one. I’m currently in Vegas watching couples who’ve known each other for five minutes elope. What the fuck? I mean great for them, but per my last one thousand or so letters, couples that have known and dated and loved one another for eons longer can’t? Please direct me to someone who actually has a logical brain. Or does it all work via money? Are you all just doing what some company or person with enough money pays you to do? In which case please send me to the sluttiest politician I can find. I can lobby too. P.S. If you don’t understand what this means, please ask your poor overworked intern about the gay soap opera I’ve been telling them about for about a decade now. I’m sure someone in your office knows.”

Dutch folded up the letter and stuck it back in the bag.

“I mean I wasn’t the only one a pain in their ass. We’re pretty good at being obnoxious as possible. Daniel knows this better than anyone which is why I’m pretty sure he and Johnny decided not to divide us into sides for their wedding party and just create one where we moved about and helped when and where we were needed. Daniel’s had to contend with us just showing up, sharing his bed like we’re Goldilocks and he’s one of the three bears but the one with the just right bed. Except there’s four of us.

“But Johnny’s important to us, just like we’re important to each other. And while we were shitty to Daniel for about six months I think decades of friendship and lovingly annoying the shit out of him has made up for it. He complains, for sure, but there’s no bite to it. Hell this morning, he was pissed when we came in to wake him up. Surprisingly not the most morning person to anyone other than Johnny. More like a snapping turtle.

“But he’s also there when you need him. Picking me up from the airport, visiting, sending care packages. Like they’re both there when you need them. And I think that’s why so many people struggled to pick a side at the actual wedding. They’ve been together for so fucking long that it’s hard to pick a side unless you’re family or their mom.

And then even I saw Lucille and Laura wanting to sit together and trying to move the seats together. Sorry Bobby we made a mess of your planning. Just be glad they didn't hold it in your actual church, your pews would've been pushed together, because nothing stops the LaRusso or Lawrence mom's.

"There's something comforting and horrifying about being known so well. And they do know each other pretty well. Like when we left Johnny this morning he told us to make sure Daniel drank a lot of water and ate a good breakfast because he knew. Knew that the night before was emotionally filled conversations with loved ones and lots of celebratory drinking.

"And Daniel on the other hand knew Johnny probably hadn't slept too well and worried about him almost as soon as he finished muttering about how much he hated us for waking him up.

"It's that Daniel arguably got stuck looking at his damn boutonnières for like a half hour with his brow furrowed trying to decipher what it meant because he knows Johnny picked out the flowers. It's why the weirdo is sitting there right now unable to keep from touching the centerpiece. Yeah I see you.

"It's big stuff like knowing when the other is off their game and sick but still stubbornly trying to work or buying a house and making a home. It's smaller stuff like, from what I heard from chatting with the librarians at the bar, going on dates to the library and just walking around whispering and recommending books to one another because they remembered something the other had said about learning about xyz or a mild interest in a moment about the other.

"It's going to Newark in winter to spend time with family, or traveling around to visit friends. It's making one another coffee or tea in the morning, or falling asleep together on the couch. All things I've seen when I've gone to visit.

"It's all these things that are small and big acts of love. Which is why while I was annoying my local and my not so local representatives, Jimmy, Tommy and Bobby were also doing what they could. A bit more…arguably importantly. Between law, holding a government office and being a well loved pastor it's been a lot of work to get here. Which I feel like you all know. And I'm sure you're like hurry up, we want to eat something before it gets cold.

"Which I feel you, the LaRussos are learning I can give them a run for

their money when it comes to talking," Dutch had grinned and turned towards them picking up his glass. "So here's what I'm going to say specifically to Daniel.

"Thank you. Thank you for being an annoying pain in the ass who refused to ever give up or back down or stay down. Thank you for being stubborn and for caring and having a big heart. Because you forgave all of us for being dicks, and best of all is you helped us heal. You took a second look at Johnny and decided to stay by his side and while he hated himself arguably the most just showered him with love until he learned to forgive himself and love himself again. I know it was like a group effort, and that we can't overlook Mr. Miyagi's efforts and patient care. But I've already told him thanks probably a thousand times and he's told me to stop in that polite way of his by giving me chores. Thank you Daniel, for taking such good care of Johnny's heart, and for being our knight in shining armor."

Daniel had cried. He hadn't meant to. But Dutch knew just what to say to throw him off. But he had Johnny with him, by his side, he had cake to eat and wine to drink and dancing to do. And cheers. Cheers from his grandparents.

"Per Cent'anni!"

Daniel had thanked them, the guys, the gals, everyone before leaving. Maybe getting too much joy out of scooping Johnny off and walking towards their ride to the airport. A promise of, "We'll see you when we get back."

"Okay, the table is starting to dig into my skin. I'm sure I've got weird patterns on my back. I'd like to sleep in our nice fancy bed."

"You don't want to sleep here, under the stars? Listening to that party happening somewhere on the mountains out that way?"

"Oh hell no."

Daniel laughed, moving careful to disentangle himself, to leave without hurting or causing any additional friction that Johnny clearly had stated he didn't want.

"How about a warm bath?"

"That'd be nice but I'm pretty sure there's a good chance I'll fall asleep. And you…what did you do? Drink five espresso's since we landed?" Johnny asked taking his hand again and carefully sliding off

the table with a slight grimace.

"I had three. The lady at the front desk seemed to like making them," Daniel said moving to wrap an arm around Johnny, and walk with him towards the bath.

"So you're never sleeping again?"

"I took a short nap."

"Yeah you were out for a good five minutes before you found me again."

"I tell you, if I don't have something to cuddle I can't sleep."

"Yeah and apparently I can't if you're not stuck to me like a freaking octopus," Johnny said as they walked to the bathroom and he slipped off the robe stepping into the tub.

"How did you even sleep with just the guys?" Daniel asked turning on the water.

"I didn't. Which is why you're going to have to make sure I don't drown in the bath. Which… why is the bath so tiny?"

Johnny's knees were practically to his chest, trying to sit in the tiny tub. He looked bewildered and a little confused as the water rose up around him.

"What if I get stuck?" Johnny asked.

"You're not going to get stuck. If you do then I packed plenty of lube and I'll get you out of there."

"Then I'll need another bath. Four is too many."

Daniel laughed softly. "I guess Italian baths weren't made for tall Californian hunks."

"Hunk of what?" Johnny asked as Daniel found a spot to precariously perch, one foot in the water for balance.

"Love?"

"Cheesy."

"Muscle?"

“Obvious.”

Daniel set about washing Johnny’s hair, liking the way his hands looked in Johnny’s hair. Maybe he should’ve taken off his rings, but he didn’t want to. Unless it pulled at Johnny’s hair but it didn’t seem to be a problem. He didn’t want to ever take them off.

Johnny had put those on his finger with so much tearful emotion in his eyes that it nearly made Daniel cry when it’d come to his turn. Just what Bobby had needed two sobbing idiots in love trying to make it official for the government and in front of their friends and family.

All three of them had to take a moment to compose themselves, Bobby carefully clearing his throat and pretending everything was fine as he continued on with the ceremony. The same tearful look that the guys got as they signed the documents, Tommy and Jimmy making them official official.

“Are you crying?” Johnny asked head tilted back to look at him.

“Good tears,” Daniel said as Johnny reached up to brush them away with a wet hand.

Johnny nodded, reaching towards him, a silent ask for a kiss that Daniel answered warmly.

It took a bit of combined effort, but they did manage to get Johnny out of the tub and Daniel took a shower laughing as Johnny complained.

“Why didn’t you tell me there was a shower?”

“Because you looked adorable stuck in the tub.”

“Mean.”

“I’ll give you lots of kisses to make up for it.”

“I’ll add them to your tab.”

“Oh god no. Uh can I trade them for hand jobs?”

“No. I’m adding two thousand.”

“That’s unfair. You got out without too much issue.”

“Fine. Then just one, but a special one.”

“Oh my god you went from 2,000 to 1? How does that work? If we haggle anywhere please let me do the haggling.”

“No, not just one, one special quality kiss.”

“Are you saying my kisses aren’t special or quality?”

Daniel caught the look that Johnny gave him from where he was drying off.

“How dare you. My kisses are all top tier!”

“Says the man who started to fall asleep while watching a movie, leaned over to give me a kiss and kissed my chin before face planting in my lap.”

“I was exhausted! That doesn’t count.”

“That’s why I’m saying not just any old kiss.”

“Not just any old kiss. Be careful or maybe I’ll go on a kissing strike.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Daniel frowned, he wouldn’t, he liked teasing Johnny about it, but he was right. No kissing would be just as bad for him. Plus he liked kissing Johnny.

“I wouldn’t. But for teasing me I do want a kiss now.”

Johnny smiled moving carefully to avoid the curtain and to lean into the shower to kiss him.

It was a good kiss. The kind where Daniel wanted to push that towel off of Johnny and pull him into the warmth of the shower and not stop kissing until the warm water ran out. But they had plans and Daniel did in fact want to go on their tours. He’d helped plan and decide everything after all.

He let go and Johnny kissed the top of his head before leaving him to finish his shower on his own. When he finished and crawled into bed, Johnny was reading, and Daniel curled up beside him as he finished the page he was on.

“Good night ***Amore mio*** ,” Johnny said.

“What?”

Johnny kissed him. “I asked your grandparents to teach me some words and phrases. It’s right, right?”

My beloved. Daniel felt a blush spread like wildfire.

“Sure you can’t go again?”

“Go to sleep. I still want to attempt hiking Vesuvius tomorrow and I know you do too.”

Daniel wanted to protest but Johnny turned out the light and curled up in bed by his side. He ran his fingers gently across Johnny’s arm, enjoying the warmth and solidness of him in his arms.

Johnny was right, he did want to go. He was the one who’d recommended they hike Mt. Vesuvius. He wanted to eat the tomatoes grown on the mountain, in simple pastas and on Napoli style pizza.

He wanted to eat so much gelato they got sick of it.

He wanted to explore.

He was excited for the future.

He was excited to drop the weight of LaRusso Auto off of his shoulders. He was stunned that Johnny didn’t care and yet unsurprised.

He’d worried about it for so long as he moved the pieces in place so Louie could take over. Because Johnny had supported him the entire time. They’d moved out of their first apartment so Daniel could save and open the auto shop. They’d moved to West Hollywood so he could focus on school and look at spaces to open up the dealership. Wherever Daniel wanted to go, wherever he thought of moving Johnny hadn’t minded. Helped pack up time and again as they moved around LA.

It was one of the big things he hadn’t exactly said when he bought the house, when he’d taken Johnny to look at house after house. A thank you for moving with me so much. A promise they wouldn’t move again for a long time. That they could finally settle and put down roots.

Daniel loved their home. Loved the garden. Loved grilling in the backyard. Loved when he came down in the morning and one of their friends was already there. Johnny had teased him once after they’d

met Julie. After Julie had complained that Daniel was the reason Mr. Miyagi didn't knock, that he was also the reason people just showed up. He just pushed his way into places, not knocking.

Usually it was while Johnny was showering because he wanted to brush his teeth and because he wanted to spend more time with Johnny since they didn't see each other much during the day. But it was also at Mr. Miyagi's, at his Ma's, not knocking just opening the front door and waltzing in. And he did it to other people too. To Laura, to the guys in the dorms and in the homes they moved to later.

Johnny teased him when he got annoyed that people just let themselves in, chilling on the couch watching cartoons or late night TV and eating ice cream. Because neither of them actually said stop this. Because Daniel did it and Johnny always had allowed it. Johnny had always loved it when the guys had snuck into the mansion to hang out with him and spend the night. It felt safer. Even if he felt awful. Even if he worried what Sid would do or say. He loved having them there. So he wasn't surprised that it continued.

A revolving door for a front door. And now that they had a house Daniel liked it. He liked waking up and going downstairs to find Louie had let himself in and was having coffee at their kitchen table reading his newspaper because he wanted to talk before work or carpool together. He liked when Dutch had gotten his fill of home, of Mr. And Mrs. P and would find him making omelets or snoring away in the guest room. Though not every night. He still woke up to find Dutch in their bed. But at least they'd gotten a bigger bed. So it wasn't like he'd gone to bed with space and then wake up rolling into a wall.

Tommy spent the night too, let himself in when things got rough in City Hall. When he was stressed Daniel would find him in Johnny's reading nook curled up and fast asleep, one of Johnny's mystery novels open and on his chest. Daniel had a date in his head, where Johnny would be at the lake house with flowers and Chinese take out back when they lived in apartments or with their parents. But as the years passed he'd find Tommy sitting in their garden, or laying on his back watching butterflies and bees buzzing about the flowers and Daniel would go and sit with him, not saying anything but bringing him a glass of lemonade or a soda. It was the one time of year where Daniel didn't huff when someone got in their bed, just rolling over in case Tommy wanted to be in the middle. A soft warning of 'If I crawl over you in my sleep I'm sorry.' But Tommy never seemed to care or mind. Even if he woke up with Daniel laying over him, having searched for Johnny in his sleep, having found him, and just laying

partially atop both of them to get to Johnny.

Tommy always laughed when he woke up in the morning like that. And Daniel would make his bananarama pancakes and they'd hang out with the guys who were around or who were free for the day. Sometimes, often as time passed that included Chozen, who'd go with them graveyard. Daniel liked to tease him that he only came because he wanted Daniel's famous bananarama pancakes though he knew Chozen was there to be leaned against, to support if needed on that hike through the graveyard.

Jimmy came frequently, with Jenny with the kids. Johnny's godchildren. And it was like a wall of noise. Daniel would come home and find that they'd dropped the kids off and would see tiny things near the door. Impossibly tiny shoes and Johnny in the backyard doing magic tricks to a delighted audience. Jimmy would lean his head against Daniel's shoulder and complain about sleep, about children's ability to sleep or lack thereof and failed nap times. And he'd grill and Jenny would hand Daniel a bottles of something nice and say something about how they were avoiding home for the moment so they were hiding out at Uncle Johnnys and Uncle Daniel's. And Daniel liked that, never said it, but he loved that he'd been handed that title. That tiny hands reached out for his and called him that, although not as fluidly.

Usually it was that they need a vacation. A date night. But they didn't want to go far so they came to their house. And the kids camped out in the guest bedroom and Daniel would laugh when Jimmy and Jenny pushed them to one side of their bed and curled up in the other.

"We have a perfectly nice guest room, two actually," Daniel had said.

"But it feels like a sleepover, the kind you get to do when you're young," Jenny said. "Plus when Jimmy said this was a tradition, I wanted to keep it."

"We're doing this back to you, you better be prepared," Daniel had said.

"Oh any time. Just beware of legos underfoot and that small children might jump on you in the middle of the night," Jimmy said.

"That's why I like it here," Jenny said. "I'm not going to step on Legos."

"Not that you love us?"

"No. You don't have legos. I've delineated safe spaces by whether or not they have legos."

Jimmy and Jenny always made them breakfast in the morning, were always up before them because the kids were always up before them. Every time Daniel got a breakfast that smiled back at him. Decorated in a fun way that made him smile.

Bobby was over the most. Daniel would find him swimming around in the pool after work, racing Johnny, laughing telling Daniel to jump in and join them. And he would. Because they made it look fun. And it was. It always was.

There was always so many desserts when he came over. From the bakery, from his parents test kitchen, things the Brown's wanted feedback on. And Daniel had a notepad he'd pull out of the kitchen junk drawer and he'd take his notes and call the Browns later and give all his feedback and Johnny's.

Bobby always brought a movie he wanted to watch, something he didn't want to watch alone, usually a horror flick and Daniel would have Johnny curling towards him waiting for Daniel to tell him the scary part was over and Bobby clinging to his other side watching but holding Johnny's hand super tight.

Daniel always made popcorn but it almost never got eaten until the movie was over and he turned on some late night comedy show. He loved how Johnny practically crawled into his lap every time, burying his head against Daniel, not wanting to see, wrapped up in a soft blanket. How every night Johnny followed him around, close, holding his hand because it was dark out and the movie haunted the air a little longer. And Bobby wouldn't leave either, so they'd camp out, chatting in the bathroom while Johnny showered, brushing their teeth and catching up. And there was never a choice, the doors to the guest rooms never opened on those nights as Bobby crawled into bed with them.

Sometimes Mr. Miyagi's truck would be parked outside and he'd find Mr. Miyagi sitting in their garden drinking tea and they'd sit and chat. Sometimes Sato and Yukie came with and they'd make dinner together and play games. Sometimes they'd bring Chozen, or sometimes when Kumiko came she'd bring him. And Daniel would find him looking through the scrapbooks or at the books on the shelves, at little mementos of all the years Daniel and Johnny had spent together. And Kumiko would bring CD's that she liked and play music and they'd

dance late into the night, moving furniture aside so there'd be more room or dancing in the garden.

His ma would come by and bring things she saw and thought they might need. Stuff for cleaning their refrigerator coils, furnace filters, batteries for the fire and carbon monoxide detectors, lubricant for their garage door, and shower head cleaner. She brought light bulbs if she saw a sale and was out replacing her own and Daniel would find her sometimes in the kitchen cooking up a storm because she wanted to and they'd have leftovers for weeks.

Laura would come over with clothes she thought Johnny would like, or shirts for Daniel. Things that were in fashion according to the magazines she read. She'd bring tickets to shows and performances. She'd order take out or make pizza rolls and she'd bring a house plant she saw that needed a home. And sometimes she came with Abuela, or Gabriella and the fridge would be overflowing with food and the dinners they'd have would be amazing. And sometimes Abuela and Gabriella were just there, chatting away with Johnny, with cousins and grandchildren playing in the pool or in the garden and someone grilling.

Daniel enjoyed it. He enjoyed coming home to so much warmth. He enjoyed basking in the glow of it.

He loved when Nonnio and Nonnia came to stay with them and he woke up to the house smelling like his childhood and watching the way they interacted with Johnny the way Johnny listened intently to everything they said. And how sometimes when he had a bad day he'd come home and there'd be a hint of that and he'd realized Johnny had learned one of his Nonnia's recipes and had made it for him.

He'd wrap his arms around Johnny's waist and press his face into his back and breathe him in, soil and flowers and good cooking smells. And he'd help, wherever Johnny was along with the recipe, and they'd play music and they'd dance and Daniel loved it all. Their home, their guests, and that feeling of finally having a place that was theirs.

And there was so much he was looking forward to when they got home. Of passing the mantel of LaRusso Auto off to Louie. Seeing his face when Daniel surprised him. He was excited to work for magazine's like some Peter Parker or something only instead of taking pictures of his super hero alter ego, he'd take fashion photos or news photos or food photos for recipes or products and photos of Johnny.

Maybe he'd get really good at taking photos of flowers, and he could use that practice as an excuse to hang around Johnny's flower shop, watching him work, helping people plan out the best way to say what they were struggling to say, to express emotions when words didn't seem to be enough. To find their voice in an unconventional way.

He was excited to go home, to carry Johnny through that door again, to knock his feet out from under him, scoop him up and laugh while Johnny pieced together where exactly he was being taken. Maybe he'd try and throw him off by grabbing a snack on the way to their bedroom.

He was excited to swim in their pool, to have coffee in the mornings, for hundreds and thousands of more dinners cooked together, an intricate dance around one another.

He was excited to get up in the morning and watch Johnny puzzle over their Italian hotel's breakfast. Cakes and tarts and pastry filled breads, fruit and espresso.

He was excited to hike and for their tour of Pompeii. He was excited for Sicily and to see family he'd only ever heard of.

Nonnia warned him he'd probably spend the day making pasta with his cousins and he was excited to see Johnny a giant among his Nonnia's elderly cousins hard at work rolling out handmade pasta before exploring everywhere.

Nonnio recommended by vespa, which his mother sounded horrified by but Daniel had been watching the vehicles dart in and out of traffic, all the drivers of cars, buses, and vespas not seeming to follow any rules.

There probably were some but their taxi driver had pulled out of their lane and jumped forward, ahead, trying to cut in earlier towards the exit they needed.

Johnny had held his hand pretty tightly and Daniel wanted to see how tight he'd hold on if they took to the streets on a vespa.

He was excited for Rome and the Colosseum, Florence, Venice, Tuscany, and ending in Milan. For the family they'd been given addresses of to visit along the way. To catch up with cousins who had written and were excited to meet, distant aunts and uncles who'd heard so much about him and he them.

And the Dutch's apparently had a surprise for them in Milan and Daniel couldn't stop rolling that over in his head, trying to guess.

There was so much to do and yet part of him was worried that if he shut his eyes it wouldn't be there when he opened them again. So many years of bad luck, of brutally awful bad luck and it all felt too good to be true.

He remembered being a kid in his Nonnia's kitchen his dad picking him up so he could see all the photos of Italy better.

"That's where Nonnia and Nonno are from. That's them."

"No way."

"Yes. That was them before they became Nonnia and Nonno, back before I was even born. They're from big families, you know? But they came here with just a little, like that ring Nonnia wears sometimes for special occasions. And some day, when you're older, your Ma and I are going to take you. And you can meet all your cousins and aunts and uncles and great aunts and uncles."

"You mean there's more of them?" Daniel had asked.

"Tons. Some families lose touch with second cousins and third cousins and what not. But LaRussos don't. Nonnia and Nonno know where everyone you're related to on our side of the family is and all the latest gossip. It's a wonder they know anything beyond that. But you'll see. Just you wait."

He had.

And then he'd given up.

And then Johnny hadn't thought of anywhere else but Italy for their honeymoon for who knows how long.

A chance for Daniel to reconnect with his roots, to see all those people that his Nonnio and Nonnia told him he was related to.

He had a long list of names and phone numbers and addresses. An old beaten up address book that they'd give him. With notes and reminders. And a promise that he'd bring back photos and updates on how everyone was doing, that he'd given them all the gifts Nonnio and Nonnia had given him to give.

And that'd all happen soon, as soon as he went to sleep. But he didn't want to go to sleep.

It was a fight, an internal one, between not wanting their first day? More than a day? He'd count it as a day even though he knew it wasn't because of the flight, of marriage, to be over.

He wanted to savor each day, each hour, each minute, quietly reminding himself of the different titles they'd shared.

Strangers

Bully and bullied

Classmates

Rivals

Competitors

Acquaintances

Friends

Best friends

Boyfriends

Lovers

Partners

Fiancées

Grooms

Husbands

He liked that title, he liked sharing that with Johnny.

He wanted to just spend a few more hours looking back at the long journey they'd been on together.

Ever since he stepped foot in California Johnny had been in his life. A sturdy hand to hold, a warm embrace when he needed it, someone who listened and cared, who knew him. Sure they still misunderstood each other, they still fell off balance and had to get back up and

communicate to find that balance again, but they always did. Because what they had was so important to one another. It was worth fighting for and protecting, encouraging it to grow and thrive.

Daniel spent a long time trying to balance, to figure out how to balance. And it wasn't easy. But having Johnny with him helped. It made it easier. But what he hadn't realized, in his long search for balance, was that what he had was harmony.

Chapter End Notes

> Tomorrow will be the final chapter and an authors note. So there will be two chapters but only one as an actual chapter if that makes sense. 🖤
>
> Also San Franscisco was one of the first places to allow same sex couples to have hospital visitation rights and that was in 1989, however I couldn't see them leaving LA. In the USA it didn't happen until 2015, which felt...later than I want, so it's more of a consistent pestering by their loved ones with a lot of money and time on their hands, moved it up alternative history. Because reality had it much later and took a lot longer and more hard work to get it to pass in the USA and California in general went back and forth on it a lot. You can read more about it and the time line for it in the USA here. So in this fiction, they're happily married and no government take backs because they would like the ex-cobras to stop calling them.

Root Beer Floats in the Garden

Laura had thrown countless parties, had been to so many parties that she'd lost count.

At one point the only benefit of parties was different food than what the staff made her. Things that weren't just healthy fad diet foods or good for her complexion. Things that weren't just what they thought was trendy for her to eat. And of course booze, and an excuse to go shopping for some nice dress or outfit.

But what she had wanted was the parties she was having now.

Yearly Halloween parties at her home, dinner parties with Lucille or at her sons.

Their sons?

They got to share now right?

She now had two sons.

She liked that. She felt like she unofficially had a lot of kids. Adopting ex-cobras who really adopted her first and their friends. She liked having been the house to stay at for a long time, with Jessica spending the night and catching her up on all the gossip in Ohio. Like what had happened to her ex boyfriend and whatever drama that always seemed to follow Elizabeth Anne Rooney. She liked that Jessica tried to talk her into going rock climbing with her and Laura agreed, but only the indoor ones. The ones with staff waiting below and colorful hand holds. It was nice to put chalk on her hands and give it a try.

And she kept doing it. There was something satisfying about picking out a new path and trying to figure out where to go and how to get there. Relying on herself to puzzle it out and to get to the top.

She liked when Kumiko came over and they went and got their nails done and she talked about Tokyo or wherever in the world she'd gone to. And she liked going shopping with her and Ali, watching local performances and hearing Kumiko's take on the dancers.

She liked her dinner parties with Lucille, or when they'd go out to the Country Club parties together, getting dressed up and going to a salon to have their hair done. She hadn't ever hated the country club, but

she'd gotten bored with it, and now, now it was fun again with Lucille chatting away about life, her family, her work and about their sons.

But some of her favorite parties were at Mr. Miyagi's.

Her favorite of all favorites were surprise parties. And this one was going to be a doozy.

Daniel had called from Italy, asking her to get everyone together. He had big news. Not the normal type of big news a couple from a honeymoon came back with, which she was prepared to tease them about. But he was going to give Louie Jr. the business.

Jimmy was the only other person who knew and he'd helped draft up the documents.

On the other hand, she was using it as a chance to re-celebrate the marriage. A welcome home party. Which was the excuse she'd given to wrangle everyone together.

A surprise for the boys, her boys, and a surprise for Louie Jr. and the rest of the LaRusso's. The one's still in town anyway.

She was also going to finally have the talk she'd wanted to. There were things she wanted to say to Daniel.

Things she hadn't said because every time she tried it wasn't the right time.

She'd left Johnny tucked into bed surrounded by his ex-cobras, laying a satisfying lipsticked kiss on each of their foreheads.

But Daniel was crying and having a heart to heart with Lucille, and his grandparents.

And then later he was drinking and crying with Sato and Mr. Miyagi.

And then Dutch made a big speech and he teared up and he'd cried at the actual ceremony.

Laura was worried that if she so much as said 'Congratulations!' he'd burst into tears again and he'd be too dehydrate to make it to Italy.

To be fair, Johnny was crying a lot too, but she got to have her heart to heart with him earlier.

She got to have dinner with him, just the two of them in a big fancy

bar and restaurant overlooking LA.

She got to tell him how much she loved the flower shop and how proud she was of him. She'd loved sitting with him going over the designs for the shop, the flowers he wanted to offer, the bouquet. The signs Chozen had painted for him. She remembered going in and seeing Chozen painting on the ceiling flowers and carefully writing what they meant next to them in a pretty scrawl. She'd asked Johnny if he'd requested it. But he'd said, "Chozen asked if I wanted some art and I said I'd like that and to just do what he wanted. And he did this."

It'd been stunning, and she remembered sitting on the counter having brought coffee for herself and Chozen, watching him work. Watching him make signage for the shop. Things Johnny had thought about like "Don't know what to get? Start with a mood." And like a mood ring had set up flowers and their meanings.

He'd gotten copies of the floriography books and magazines and set them out for customers to look at. Recommendations of what to get someone based on their favorite flowers. And she remembered going with him to pick out plants to fill the shop with. Bonsai of course from next door. But also things he planted and took careful care of in the window boxes and around the entrance. Things he'd worked with Mr. Miyagi on.

They grew trees along the edge of the shops, jacaranda and lilac, a magnolia tree that when they bloomed were stunning. And the bonsai were beautiful. And she loved the orchids and the moneyplants and the bamboo, cacti and succulents that had found homes around the florist shop.

Their shops were connected. With a little back door in case either needed help. Mostly because Johnny felt bad for leaving. But Yukie was usually around to help and she liked going in and making bouquets with Johnny and popping over to the bonsai shop and chatting with Yukie or Mr. Miyagi. She loved that they had signs they put up in their windows and on the front desk:

"At bonsai shop next door, ring for assistance."

Or

"At flower shop, come over for bonsai."

She liked the shelf behind Johnny's work station was for bonsai pick

up and she liked that Mr. Miyagi proudly displayed bouquets he requested from Johnny in his shop and that he and Yukie took them home every night so that Sato could also enjoy them at home.

She was so damn proud and she loved the shop. She loved hanging out with him there and talking about flowers, helping him if he needed it, answering the phone when he was focused.

She told him how much she loved him and was proud of how far he'd come, teasing him about how small he'd once been, asleep in the back of their car, trusting her so completely to keep him safe and that it'd all be okay.

She'd brushed tears from her eyes.

"I'm so sorry that it wasn't. That for years we lived in that mansion and I didn't know that it wasn't okay. That I didn't know it wasn't okay at Cobra Kai. But I'm so glad that despite that you made it here. You are amazing Johnny. I'm so proud of you. Of everything you've accomplished. And I'm happy for you. That you get to do it this. That you found someone who loves you so fiercely that you love just as much. Someone whose got your back."

It wasn't something she'd ever had. Sid hadn't…loved her like that and it took a long time to realize it. To start chipping away at the fairy tale of it all to see just how rotten it was. And by then it almost felt too late. Going through the motions for so long, that she'd almost lost herself, almost lost Johnny.

They'd talked a lot that night.

It had been good. And it put her right on time to see Louie and the girls return from their festivities. Louie was covered in glitter. The girls had wished him a good night and he'd looked a little lost. So she'd sat with him, giving him a glass of water. Checking to make sure he was okay.

He was fine.

It'd just taken a while to get the story. A secret he hadn't been sure about sharing because he hadn't understood. But she had later when she'd found Yukie bringing Chozen water and aspirin. Apparently when Kumiko taught dance, Chozen was her practice partner. Which meant he danced. He'd learned a lot of choreography. And a very drunken Chozen apparently was quite the performer.

She wanted to make a bet with Lucille, or maybe Yukie.

Who would realize it first?

Of the group, her money was on Tommy. Tommy who was sweet and thoughtful and still figuring himself out. The quiet third boy who'd also been in love with Ali and had never made a move. Maybe he'd get the courage to do so this time.

She watched as Tommy walked over to Chozen sitting down next to him and handing him an iced tea. He'd been practicing his Japanese, learning bits of Okinawan.

But Dutch might figure it out first. Joining the two laughing and stealing some of Chozen's drink.

Maybe.

She was pretty sure the last to figure out his surprising popularity would be Chozen himself.

Though Daniel would never believe it, he'd never notice how Chozen had relaxed around the ex-cobras, had made a home for himself in the Valley. How while his gaze still lingered on Johnny, while every move was still filled with love and affection, he wasn't as devastated as she'd expected.

Though he supposed it was hard to be devastated when your friends, when Ali and Kumiko and Jessica were buying or bringing you shots every time you turned around. When your secret crush wasn't so secret and the people around you cared enough to check in and keep company.

It was why part of the delight of the party after the wedding was the dancing. Not just getting to dance with Johnny, or Daniel, or watching the two of them dance together. But to see how fun everyone had. To watch the girls dance, friends and strangers, the guys. Mr. Miyagi dancing with Yukie and Sato.

Chozen not getting to rest. Kumiko danced with him first, then Yukie, then Jessica was laughing and they whirled in a blur across the floor, and Ali. Then because the guys were the guys there was no chance for Chozen to stop and feel or wait or even notice the way Johnny and Daniel were looking at one another as they danced through one song to the next.

Because Dutch was dancing with him, and passing him off to Bobby, and Jimmy paused in dancing with his wife to go for a spin and Tommy and then LaRusso's found him.

She'd passed Chozen at breakfast the following morning, exhausted and hungover pushing eggs around his plate. So she sat with him for a bit giving him some toast and offering him some aspirin from her purse. Not talking just sitting and hoping Daniel and Johnny had had a good flight. That they enjoyed Naples, remembering when she'd gone to Italy with Sid and how this trip would be a million times better. Because it'd be filled with love. Though, she did enjoy all the fancy clothes she'd bought in Italy, and the coffee. And Chozen seemed fine, especially when friends filled their table chatting about the flowers and the food and the cake.

"Can't believe our boys are finally married," Lucille said picking up a glass of champagne that Laura had set out.

"It was perfect, something Johnny always dreamed of."

"Really?" Lucille asked turning towards her.

"That florists I talk about from time to time. You remember them?"

"Yeah the elderly couple who passed away."

"Well I used to take Johnny with me. The start of his life was mostly spent at the flower shop and there were two big events. Valentine's Day and wedding season. They were the flower shop to go to for weddings. It was really their specialty. And throughout the year couples would come in and talk about their engagement and what they wanted and those two, they just loved it, and they loved Johnny.

"They'd scoop him up so he could be part of the conversation. And at first he just sort of watched you know? A little baby with big blue eyes and the chubbiest of cheeks and that blonde hair. And the owners, they'd tell me he was their secret weapon. Couples got frustrated and argued during the whole process, because it was stressful. But they wouldn't fight or bicker if a baby was present. And every sale Johnny was a part of went smoothly. They said he was their lucky charm. But it meant as he grew up he was surrounded by weddings.

"He studied all the bouquets, all the flowers, sat with the couples listening to them talk about their wedding plans. Sometimes the

couples would ask his opinion and he gave such wonderful responses. Recommending flowers that went well with the theme for their wedding, because he'd go through all the wedding designs with them. It was so charming. He was kind of obsessed.

"And when they passed, he still stopped, not just to look at flowers but to look at bridal magazines at the dentists or the doctors office, flipping through books with me. He loved weddings. And he was so excited when he got to be a part of all the decision making for mine. I told Sid that it was a must. No negotiable. Johnny was my best man."
"Seriously?"

"Smallest best man on the planet. But the most hard working. It was an honorary title, I just wanted him to stand nearby, for him to feel a part of it. To get to help me eat cake and try on fancy clothes. But he held the rings, and woke me up and he kept me moving throughout the day with his little kid's watch.

"It was a beautiful wedding. Intense, fairy tale, gaudy. But it was fun. I just wish the rest of it had been the same way. I used to tease him you know, when he got older about marrying. About Ali. I hadn't realized that Ali would dump him. That we'd start planning just for it to fail, that Sid had made him plan the entire thing, to budget it out. He told me it was how he'd planned to get rid of Johnny. The price tag was the wedding. I nearly slapped him, but my lawyer had a good hold on my arm.

"I'm glad they didn't get married, but I didn't realize how deeply that scarred until I started to tease him about Daniel and he pushed back."

Laura sighed lifting her glass of champagne and taking a sip.

"So I'm glad, so very very grateful that he finally got a good one. That that final piece that's been wounded and sticking since his godparents died finally got to heal over. That he got a second shot at it, but as a first. That-" She reached out and took Lucille's hand. "It was with Daniel, who when I teased him about it already had a cake picked out."

Lucille laughed. "Of course he did. Was it the cake they had?"

"Oh yes it was. I remembered that. And it was just as delicious as Daniel had made it sound."

"How are you holding up?" Lucille asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well I just keep thinking of Daniel’s dad you know? How this was something he so badly would’ve wanted to be a part of. And I think of Daniel, surly the entire way here and I’m trying to pinpoint when this became home for him. When he put down roots and went from being that gangly teenager to a man. Which reminds me of when he was a baby and how small he was and those big baby browns and how he always babbled. And now that baby isn’t a baby anymore, and he hasn’t been for a long time. He hasn’t been a surly teenager for a long time either. And now he’s a successful business man and a husband.”

Lucille sniffed rubbing at her tear filled eyes.

“I didn’t screw it up. I was so scared I’d screw it up. When it was no longer us and just me raising him. I thought for sure…but you saw them, how happy they are. Like who else gets their wedding officiant to cry with them on their wedding day?” Lucille asked with a watery laugh. “Mine didn’t.”

“Mine didn’t either,” Laura said hugging Lucille. “And I’m pretty proud of them too. Of Johnny. I wish we’d gotten to have more of what you and Daniel have. But I feel like I got a second shot of that when they lived with me for a bit. And I’m really just so relieved that despite my massive screw ups he’s a kind loving man.”

“He is, he’s grown so much since I first met him.”

“What an awful first impression.”

It was. It had been awful. Possibly the worst first impression Daniel and Johnny could’ve had. But they’d come so far together. And she was looking forward to sitting on Mr. Miyagi’s deck and hearing about how Italy went. About how all of Johnny’s plans had gone.

It’d been lonely and not lonely all at the same time.

Johnny seemed to worry about her whenever he went on a trip. Or maybe the people in his life worried about her then. Because Abuela always came to visit more, Lucille always came to make dinner, the ex-cobra’s and their parents, Yukie and Mr. Miyagi and Sato.

Whenever Johnny was out of town even if she freed up her calendar her surprise guests quadrupled. And this time, because the wedding had been recently, it was even worse.

Moshe and Tristen came by with Lucille and they spent the night, playing board games and drinking wine and it'd been wonderful.

Nonnio and Nonnia asked if she was willing to go with them to do some sightseeing and she found herself eating ice cream on the pier, feeling like she was out with parents of her own, the way they fussed over her.

As soon as Daniel and Johnny disappeared from sight Kumiko and Jessica had turned on her and starting asking her if she wanted to go rock climbing or hiking or to see a performance with them in the morning.

The guys found her later with their own activities. And before she knew it Johnny and Daniel were due back and she'd barely had a moment to sit down and breathe.

She didn't know if Johnny asked them to keep an eye on her, or if they did it themselves. But all that time that she spent fretting about how quiet being single would be, how lonely, it felt so silly.

Sid had been a presence. Someone that couldn't be ignored, even if he was somewhere else in the mansion.

She always knew he was home because the whole place changed. She could hear him, stomping around, could hear the way the staff's footsteps change to become lighter. And now it was so peaceful.

There was laughter in her home.

There was silence, peaceful healing quiet.

There was friendship and family. Things that never seemed to take root in the mansion no matter how hard she worked at it. No matter how kind she was to the staff it never seemed to grow. No matter how hard she worked to establish relationships with the people Sid introduced her to it was just all fake.

They just wanted to be there because of the mansion, because of the money and Sid's power. They didn't care about her, or want to know her. They just wanted to know enough. Enough to use her to get what they wanted, either in a friendly way or an unfriendly one.

And she never realized how much of a weight that put on her until it was gone. Until she was free. Until the unannounced sound of her doorbell ringing only to find a friend on the doorstep was such a

delightful unexpected joy. That she no longer cared if she looked picture perfect every time she answered the door. That she no longer had to be someone she wasn't, she could just be her, and the people who came to see her didn't want anything more than that.

There was also so much joy in being able to return that surprise.

She could swing past a law office in downtown and bother Jimmy and Jenny, take them out for lunch and they'd be delighted to go. She could swing by and play with their kids and coo over tiny feet and tiny fingernails and buy them adorable little outfits that she never got to do for Johnny because she hadn't had the money to buy the things she wanted for him.

She could stop by the mayors office and Tommy's assistant would run to go get him, excited to tell him that she was there because they'd always bring the assistant back something from wherever they went for lunch. She insisted on getting the best thing too. And Tommy would laugh and ask why she was trying to bribe his assistant. And she'd laugh and say it was because it meant she always was top priority when she came in. That his assistant always let her skip the line if she wanted, or made her calls priority. But it was also because she remembered being overworked and exhausted and how easily a job like that could tip into resentment. And she never wanted that to happen to Tommy.

Sid went through so many assistants and one after the other they hated him for it afterwards. And it was stressful. Though Sid always laughed about it. Which should've been a red flag.

Looking back, there were so many.

She could go sit in a church and watch Bobby talk to people, helping when he could, she could roll up her sleeves and catch up with him while going through donated items and food and passing it out.

She could find Dutch wherever he might be for a snack or drink and catch up for hours and hours.

She could go to a taco shop and listen to a family ask their matriarch why she was still working only for her to ignore them and put more food on their plates and pile hers high.

She could go visit Lucille, she could bother her at work or just hang out for a movie and dinner and some wine.

She could go to the Browns to try their newest concoction if her sweet tooth was acting up, or to Jimmy's parents home for a fancy party if she missed dressing up, or she could introduce the Dutch's to something mundane and watch them delight and puzzle over it, or she could hang out with Tommy's aunt and uncle.

If she got stir crazy she could go anywhere she wanted.

Though she kept going to Tokyo to catch Kumiko's shows, or wherever in the world she was performing.

Sometimes she told Kumiko, sometimes she didn't, just enjoying being a person in a crowd.

Often Yukie went with her, excited to surprise her niece.

Sometimes she'd mention she was going and she'd suddenly be in a group. They never missed an opportunity and it was fun to watch them all. To see Sato and Mr. Miyagi and Yukie laugh and the four of them try to find their way around whatever city Kumiko was performing.

"Good excuse," Sato told her one time after they took pictures together in front of the Eiffel tower after seeing Kumiko perform in Paris.

"What is?"

"Seeing Kumiko-san perform. When little, we make promise, see world together. But then my family pick Yukie-san for bride. And instead of talk, Nariyoshi-san make big stand. I was so hurt. So mad. But then Nariyoshi-san just leave, without either of us. No Yukie-san…no me. And get even more hurt. Now know never too late. Still make dream true. Still see world, together. Just long long time after we thought we'd do so. Thank you Laura-san."

She hadn't understood why he'd thanked her. But it made sense then every time she mentioned that Kumiko was performing somewhere new, that she was thinking of going they quickly offered to go with her.

They traveled on their own, a few times a year, but Kumiko was a good extra excuse.

And they sometimes took Chozen with them and it was fun to watch them dote and tease him. The sibling like way Kumiko reacted

whenever she saw him.

And she liked surprising Dutch in Korea. She liked the look of shock on his face when she watched him compete and she brought him flowers after or when she'd visited him in university and she always stopped by to ask, "When did you last eat?"

She walked to Mr. Miyagi's kitchen opening the fridge and pulling out a couple of glass bottles of root beer. The glass bottles were harder to find now, but Jimmy always knew where to get them if she ever wanted them.

She set them on the counter and opened the freezer as she heard the doors slide open and footsteps echo through the hall.

Mr. Miyagi had gone to pick them up and she could hear Daniel, excitedly chatting away about Italy.

And then there was Johnny picking up a glass bottle of root beer, twisting off the top and flicking it into the trash with a nice clink, just the way she'd taught him as a kid.

No longer a kid, a man. A married man with a business he owned and a warm loving home.

He tapped the glass in a cheers to her champagne glass, before pouring it on top of the ice cream she'd scooped into a glass.

She set down the container and pulled him into a hug.

"Welcome home Johnny."

"Thanks Mom."

"Ready to tell me about Italy?"

Johnny smiled, shifting the bag on his shoulder and pulling out a gift bag and setting it across from her.

"I got you venetian glass, a bracelet made of that same glass with volcanic rock from Mt. Vesuvius, some lucky peppers, or at least I was told they were lucky, some scarves, and some sunglasses from Milan."

"This is too much," she said looking at the colorful array of things that slid out of the bag.

"We maybe had a little too much fun shopping. We sent back a couple

boxes worth of stuff."

"Daniel was fine with that?"

There was a time where Daniel had been very adamant against Johnny spending any money towards him. She understood. She'd been similar when she first got married to Sid. When they first dated. And she worried the honeymoon might seem too extravagant.

"Well we hit a bump when we went to Sicily. His family wouldn't stop giving us stuff. They packed up homemade pasta for us and things to bring back for the rest of the family. And so we ran out of space really fast.

"So we gave in and just started shipping stuff home that wasn't breakable or would go bad quickly. I had to call Jimmy to get the pasta home safely. We ended up shipping it with his families company. That and the wine. Customs for family made alcohol is weird. But Nonnio and Nonnia are going to be delighted when they get home and get it."

"Did you get anything for yourselves?" Laura asked with a soft laugh.

"We did. Though I think the majority of our souvenirs are photos Daniel took. We dropped maybe ten canisters of film off to be developed on the way here. And then Daniel has a few that he wants to do himself."

"Dirty ones?"

Johnny's blush answered her question.

She burst out laughing.

"He took some pretty photos of the landscape and family that he wants to make into big prints."

"I'm sure everything he took is very artistic."

"Mom!"

"Well I look forward to seeing all the non-nude portraits you both took when they end up in those nice scrapbooks he makes."

Daniel had finished his rounds and popped up, kissing Johnny's cheek before coming in for a hug.

“Before you make your announcement I’d like to have a chat,” Laura said.

She felt him stiffen, and watched Johnny look at her curiously. But she smiled and he nodded, walking off with his root beer float to chat with the others.

He’d tell her all about their trip, the way he once told her all about his karate tournaments later. Just this time he’d leave parts out. Parts she’d notice he’d skip past and she’d tease him about it.

“It’s not bad,” Laura said ruffling Daniel’s hair. “I just couldn’t find a good time to chat with you during the wedding, and before you possibly freak your mom out again for changing career choices, I wanted to talk.”

He relaxed a little stepping back, he’d tanned during his trip, and Johnny had not.

Johnny’s hair was a little brighter, a little more blonde but it was fascinating to see the difference. Kumiko had once said that Daniel had made sure Johnny was wearing sunblock in the car and wouldn’t leave him alone, the first time they went to Okinawa. Making sure his pale easily burnt skin didn’t turn painfully lobster red.

She picked up a root beer, took the cap and flicked it into the trash pouring it over the ice cream and passing it to Daniel.

“You got a lot of speeches at your wedding, so there wasn’t really a good time for me to chat with you. I talked to Johnny. We had several little conversations, and I’m pretty sure Lucille got to talk to him too. I know sometimes you get a little…overwhelmed and intimidated. And maybe I like teasing you. But I’m also happy.”

She reached out and took his hand gently in hers.

“You are chatty and stubborn and strong willed. You spiral and get overwhelmed and panic. Your human. You’re still figuring out life. But you make Johnny so happy. I’m forever haunted from that day he came home from that All-Valley tournament, the way he hung his head down and the bruise around his neck and the way his voice sounded when he spoke. That shattered my heart.

“Learning that Sid was a piece of shit specifically to Johnny? That Kreese had tried to kill him? I was so worried that he’d never recover. That he’d spend his life slipping into a deep dark abyss of self hatred

and never move forward. But he did. Slowly. He took his time and you never rushed him. You both took your time. Even if it was on accident. Like two turtles stuck in their shells slowly realizing it was safe to come out, but taking years to do so. Decades to wander around.

“Like I thought Johnny might never come out of his shell again. I thought that kid that trusted me so much, that understood so much and just rolled with every punch was gone. That I’d not see that smile again, or that it’d never be as bright. I worried that I fucked up. I mean I did.

“I was drowning when I married Sid and I didn’t want Johnny to drown too. I thought he’d have a better chance. That Sid would give him a chance for better things. A brighter future beyond anything I could ever have offered on my own. We were barely keeping afloat. And I didn’t have anyone to turn to. I didn’t have anyone to help or rely on. My parents were gone, I was an only child, Johnny’s father was out of the picture and the last people I’d had who did care had passed away suddenly. It was one bad thing after another.

“But I wouldn’t have realized it if not for you. I wouldn’t have realized that Johnny and his friends and you had made me a path out. You’d found a secret passageway with an escape hatch. I could safely leave Johnny with Mr. Miyagi and cut the cords to that golden parachute that was trying to strangle us.

“I could be brave because you all were so brave. Because Johnny was so impossibly brave. Braver than any kid or teen needed to be. And I’m sorry for everything you went through, that you both went through. But I’m also so thankful. Thankful that you helped him back up again and again. That you, I presume, make sure he puts on sunblock because you are wonderfully tan and he’s not sunburned at all, which for a vacation as packed as I’m sure yours was is a feat.

“I’m thankful that whether you meant to or not you brought me people. You and your mom invited me over and I know you were nervous but we’ve been close friends ever since. And you had Mr. Miyagi over and he suffers my drop-ins. You expanded my small circle. A circle that had been superficial for years. With acquaintances and mostly unreliable people. And now I have guests over, people to visit who I’m excited to visit who are excited to see me. Some of that was Johnny, but some of it was you. Together the two of you—”

She moved wrapping an arm around his shoulder and turning him

towards the garden.

“Took a whole bunch of lonely people and brought them all together. People who might’ve drifted apart are now so tightly knit together that there’s no fear of that. You didn’t let anyone escape.”

She squeezed Daniel’s shoulder fondly.

“So I want you to know I’m thankful. Thankful when you come over with Johnny and you bring something to distract us. Magazines, puzzles, some random sparkly toy, newspaper article, one of those gorgeous scrapbooks of yours, or a movie, like we’re the easiest distracted people on the planet, and before I know it you’ve cooked a feast.

“I fall for it every damn time even though I know it’s happening. Did you know your mom does that too? She comes over with a bottle of wine and everything she needs to cook and she pours me a glass and I sit at the counter with her and we talk and before I know it she’s cooking and any time I offer to help her cook she bemoans how she doesn’t have you to cook for so just sit and let her cook for someone.

“You both, and your grandparents who don’t give me any peace either, they also came over and cooked for me and your Nonnia swatted at me with a spoon when I offered to help,” Laura said with a soft laugh.

“You all, cook with love. And before all of you. Before Abuela, I didn’t have that. Johnny didn’t have that. For a long time, an uncomfortably long time, food was something I worried about. How would he eat? Was what I could afford to give him, would it be nutritious enough or would it stunt his growth? And every time you all feed him, you and the guys and Mr. Miyagi—”

She sniffed carefully brushing tears away.

“It nearly always makes me cry. And then you all feed me? Like yeah we had enough food when we lived with Sid, but it’s not the same. Not even close. Your food is made with so much love. So I’m grateful, grateful to you for keeping him going, not letting him stay stuck in his shell and patiently helping him out, for feeding him and me.

“I know through all of this you’ve missed your dad. But he’d be so damn proud. And I know this because I’m so damn proud of you. And I feel lucky that I get the honor of calling you one of my sons, that I am a part of your family.”

“Laura,” Daniel said softly, turning and hugging her tightly.

That brave boy who she’d first met brought secretly by the staff in her office. Looking confused and bewildered and a little pissed but so stubbornly determined to see Johnny, to find him and give him his homework and tell him to come back to school.

He’d grown so much.

“I’m happy too. Incredibly lucky. And I’ll keep tricking you and Johnny into healthy home cooked meals whenever I can. Thank you for being there when Ma wasn’t. Thanks for taking me out to countless brunches. Your a good Mom. And I’m glad Ma and I aren’t alone in LA anymore. That she came back and we both get to keep the Lawrence’s in our family. You do realize you’re stuck with us right? We don’t let go?”

“Yeah,” Laura said hugging him back. “I know, I’ve got that yearly open invite to visit. I’ve got my handmade sweater and I get my care package every year of New Jersey foods. Plus Tristen and Moshe are always adamant that I stay with them, since you and Johnny are apparently too cool to stay with your godfathers anymore.”

Daniel laughed. “It’s not that we’re too cool. It’s just all my baby cousins follow Johnny around like little ducklings and I think they secretly like him better. So I find myself kicked out of bed every night in favor of story time. We tried it once and then started staying at a hotel, then we got guilted into trying it again, and it was like ten time worse, so never ever again. You can do story time.”

Laura laughed. “It sounds like fun and I’m looking forward to trying it. And welcome home Daniel. I hope you had a good trip and lots of fun and got to connect with your roots.”

Daniel stepped back and picked up his root beer float again having a sip. “It was great.”

“Go on, go drive Lucille up a wall with your news.”

Daniel sighed. “You think it’s going to be rough?”

“I think she just wants you to be happy and it’s going to take her a moment to realize that the dealership isn’t that place. But I get it and Johnny gets it.”

“Then I expect back up.”

Laura laughed. “You’ve got it. Plus you’re going to make Louie’s year.”

“Yeah, he’s surprisingly really good at it. And he seems to like the dealership so I hope he does like this,” Daniel said putting his shoulders back, steeling himself for his announcement then turning and leaning in to kiss Laura on the cheek.

She watched as he headed out into Mr. Miyagi’s garden. The way Johnny turned towards him and smiled. A smile that was big and bright that she thought had once been lost forever.

She watched him lean into a soft kiss, the way Daniel’s arm wrapped around his waist, the way Johnny’s wrapped around his shoulder as they turned towards their friends and family. The way Daniel leaned against him, the way Johnny supported him, the way that had changed but always been the same, leaning and supporting for so long that it was automatic.

For a long time in her life it felt like doors were closed to her and Johnny. That the only way in, the only way to get opportunities was through Sid and his connections and even then they weren’t great.

But Daniel and Mr. Miyagi had opened the gate to the garden and left it unlocked for them. No matter when, no matter what, always welcomed and it would always be there. For them, for others, and no matter what the future held, no matter what changed Laura knew she and Johnny were going to be okay. And that they finally had somewhere to truly call home.

Authors Note

This is my first time trying to publish a picture so we'll see if it works. But here's a completion sticker I made in Canva with my...uh...attempt at I don't even know what you'd call this...sticker making skills?

[image]
[Image Description: Teal background with a white circle in the center that reads "I read: Root Beer Floats and Green Tea A fic longer than "War and Peace". In the upper right is a yellow golden star that reads in neon "Your sticker from Bobby" in the lower left is a bonsai and in the lower right is a root beer float with two straws, one red, one yellow and a cup of green tea next to it]

So I hope that worked. But you did. You read something longer than war and peace. This fic ended up being (not including this authors note or the cut parts or rewrites) 782,765 words.
You read something that is longer than the English translation of "Les Misérables" which is 545,925 words.
That's longer than "The Lord of the Rings" which is 558,003 words.
That's longer than War and Peace, the English translation coming out to 600,000 words.
That is longer than Tales of Genji, the English translation is 750,000 words.

And some of you read it more than once! And I just wanted to take a moment to tell you that that's amazing. Reading long works is not easy feat and I'm honored you stuck with me through this long burn slow fan fic to does so. And also major kudos, you like read a small mountains worth of words.

I started this fic on June 23, 2021 after watching Cobra Kai because I decided for once to hit that play something random shuffle button on Netflix and ended up binging the show, getting mad at the "Pride and Prejudice"-ness of it all, re-watching the films that I hadn't seen in forever and deciding I needed to write something. Never would I have expected it to be this long. I wanted to challenge myself with it which was to 1. Write a slow slow burn 2. I wanted Johnny and Daniel to create a friendship, heal and show growth before they got together 3. I wanted to publish every single day for as long as I could. And I kind of accomplished that minus so life lemons pelting me in the face.

I want to say thank you for reading. For all the kudos and the comments. There was something fun at the start about posting every day and hearing what resonated, what parts you enjoyed, foods you liked, recipes, how you were fitting the daily updates into your routines, enjoying the research or telling me that you remembered things I included. Honestly there's so many wonderful things that came from this fic that I'm so honored by. Fanart, comments, the related work by usa123 but also how, for a time this fic made me feel not quite so alone and how that seemed to resonate with so many of you.

So thank you for going on this journey with me, this long long long journey and I hope you enjoyed it. Because I enjoyed writing it and I appreciate you being here with me. 💝

Works inspired by this one

Warm Places, Safe Spaces by usa123

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!